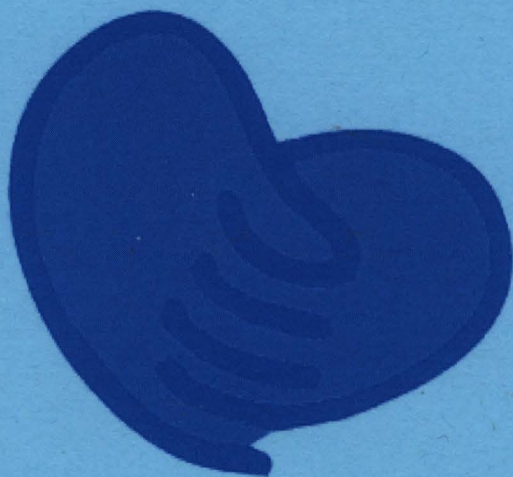


Expecting Justice, But Seeing Bloodshed

*Some Baptist Contributions to
Following Jesus in a Violent
World*



Tim Carter, Anthony Clarke (editor),
Finamore, Hazel Sherman, Graham Sparkes

06183
5C

286.06183
Egbusc
2004

**Expecting Justice
But Seeing Bloodshed**
Some Baptist Contributions to
Following Jesus in a Violent World

Tim Carter
Anthony Clarke (Editor)
Stephen Finamore
Hazel Sherman
Graham Sparkes



IBTSCENTRE
AMSTERDAM

Whitley Publications
Oxford
2004

Expecting Justice, But Seeing Bloodshed

Some Baptist Contributions to Following Jesus in a Violent World

© 2004 The Authors and Whitley Publications

ISBN 09539748 3 9

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information or retrieval system, without permission from the Publisher.

This book is published with the assistance of funds from the Whitley Committee, plus a generous donation from the Crewdson Trust. The authors are grateful for such help in enabling this book to be published.



Published by: Whitley Publications
Regent's Park College, Oxford, OX1 2LB

Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	5
	Introduction: Following Jesus in a Violent World Myra Blyth	6
1	Violence and Covetousness: Nor Anything Else that Belongs to Thy Neighbour Stephen Finamore	9
2	Violence and the Cross: God and the Death of Jesus Anthony Clarke	24
3	Violence and Worship: Redeeming the Language of God Hazel Sherman	44
4	Violence and Mission: Exploring the Clash of Civilisations through Shaffer's 'The Royal Hunt of the Sun' Graham Sparkes	58
5	Violence and the State: Do I honour, obey and pay taxes? The Irony of Romans 13 Tim Carter	73

The Contributors:

Myra Blyth is Lecturer in Liturgy and Ecumenics at Regent's Park College, Oxford.

Stephen Finamore is Minister at Westbury-on-Trym Baptist Church, Bristol and Honorary Fellow at the Bristol Baptist College.

Anthony Clarke is Tutor in Community Learning at Regent's Park College, Oxford.

Hazel Sherman is Minister at Kensington Baptist Church, Brecon.

Graham Sparkes is Head of the Faith and Unity Department of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot.

Tim Carter is Minister at Maidstone Baptist Church, Kent and Associate Research Fellow at the London School of Theology

Preface

On three occasions, now, a group of between 40 and 50 Baptist Ministers have met together for a week in the summer to engage in a consultation of those 'doing theology in context'. On these occasions, in Regent's Park College, Oxford in 1999 and 2003 and in Luther King House, Manchester in 2001, various papers were given by the participants and then discussed. The essays in this book were among those that were delivered at the 2003 conference. But they are also the work of a smaller group who have met together regularly for the last four years, so that the discipline needed and insights gained from working collaboratively might benefit our individual theological reflection. An earlier work, *Bound for Glory? God, Church and World in Covenant*, published by Whitley Press in 2002, was written by the same basic group, with some changes in the membership. The Revds Viv Lassetter and Marcus Bull have also been members of the group and contributors to the wider process of reflection.

Although each essay is the work of one author they have all undergone the process of refinement and change, through, on a number of occasions, an appreciative and critical discussion amongst the small group and also through insights gained from presentation at the wider consultation. Our hope is that this whole work is richer because of this process.

When thinking through a possible subject for future reflection we were drawn to a number of issues surrounding violence. The Baptist Union of Great Britain had initiated a number of projects under the banner of 'Following Jesus in a Violent World', and with some encouragement from BUGB we set out to write essays under this broad theme that we could offer at the 2003 Consultation. We are particularly grateful for the support from the Baptist Colleges and Whitley Publications, as well as the Crewdson Trust, to enable these essays to be published for a wider audience. We are thankful, too, to Revd Myra Blyth, who has initiated the BUGB response to the World Council of Churches Project on 'Overcoming Violence', for writing an introduction to this book. Our hope is that these essays will make some contribution to this ongoing process.

Anthony Clarke, Oxford, Easter 2004

Introduction: Following Jesus in a Violent World

Myra Blyth

In 1994 joy, gratitude and celebration marked a meeting of representatives from churches across the globe. It was a gathering of the central committee members of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the venue was Johannesburg, South Africa. It was just a few months away from the new South Africa's first free elections. During a festive worship in which the participants celebrated the ending of apartheid, the Methodist Bishop Stanley Mogaba made a point of honouring the WCC's programme to combat racism recognising that this much criticised action by the WCC had contributed enormously to the overcoming of apartheid. Building on that legacy of success and recognising that with the ending of apartheid a new enemy rears its head, the Bishop challenged the WCC members to create an equally vibrant programme to combat violence. These few words from a sermon sparked off a movement worldwide. It has galvanised the energy and vision of many in the churches who are persuaded that the primary calling of the church in the 21st century is to advocate for a world where violence is not allowed to be the dominant logic.

However we choose to analyse the nature and causes of violence, all would agree that the violence that stalks our world threatens and diminishes the lives of people at every level. This book is testimony to the commitment of Baptists in England and Wales, in response to the WCC call for an Ecumenical decade to overcome violence, to help promote and create a culture which counters the language and logic of violence. At the annual assembly of the BUGB meeting in 2001, 800 delegates affirmed that our identity and missionary calling is to follow Jesus in a violent world. John Rackley, president of the Union in 2003/4 re-iterated this challenge by urging us to learn afresh what it means to be Easter people in a Good Friday world.

The contributors to this book discuss and explore some of the ways in which Christian language and ideas can be misunderstood and thereby used

to endorse and legitimise violence and oppression. They show how faith and tradition can help us to understand anew the nature of violence from the perspective of a wounded and persecuted God and can inspire us to re-create the world as God designed and desired it.

But the book begins with an unusual twist when Steve Finamore pleads for a vision of life where conflict is not only inevitable but somehow necessary. It is not exactly an apologetic for violence, but it is a strong plea for us not to reduce our vision of the world and eternity to peaceful nothingness. Just as pacifists often argue that peace is not simply the absence of war, it is something much richer more dynamic and purposeful than a simple state of ceasefire. So Steve argues that life absent of the tension and conflict which comes from diversity, desire, purpose and goals is a world closer to hell than heaven.

Anthony Clarke then takes up this challenge by looking at ways of understanding Jesus' death as part of a wider Divine plan. Both Gospel and Epistle traditions are explored, resulting in a conclusion which presents a vision of God which embraces crucifixion as a mark of the vulnerability of God and resurrection as God's way of breaking the cycle of violence.

Hazel Sherman reminds us of the power of language and the ways in which our worship is shaped by words and metaphors which cause many to think of God as violent and vindictive, mirroring the world as we know it. We need a new language of atonement and new hymns of salvation not only to revitalise worship but also to be a resource for Christian apologetics equal to that enjoyed by the originators of these tired words that now need to be replaced. It must be a matter of priority for us to discern the ways in which worship reinforces the culture of violence and victimisation, and the ways in which our worship can help us to expose critique and transcend violence.

It is a fact of history that religion has been constantly co-opted by oppressive leaders to endorse and legitimise their violent projects. Today this tendency is manifesting itself in extreme and fundamental forms. The partnership between Christianity and secular power found a particular form in missionary activity, where Christianity and western civilisation imposed their version of God and the world on two thirds of the earth's peoples. That much good was done does not remove the fact that the Gospel became a significant force for coercion and exploitation. Graham Sparkes' exploration of this theme puts a specific challenge to us concerning our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a missionary people.

In the last essay Tim Carter picks up this wider theme and explores one particular example of the relationship between church and state, developing the very intriguing idea that the words of civil obedience in Romans 13 are utterly ironic, making Romans 13, like the book of Daniel, very subversive literature. Their true meaning is transparent only to those who are prepared to stand out against the public rhetoric and political propaganda of the ruling powers.

The hope is that this book will encourage others in the local ecumenical family as well as within the Baptist Union of Great Britain to go on reflecting together theologically and practically on what it means to follow Jesus in a violent world.

Violence and Covetousness: 'Nor anything else that belongs to thy neighbour'

Stephen Finamore

Introduction

The great prophet Isaiah sings a love song about a vineyard.¹ The vineyard is beautifully built and tended with great care. When harvest time comes its planter expects to find grapes but finds something else instead. The song is an allegory, the planter is God and the vineyard is God's people. The fruit God expects to find is justice but instead he sees bloodshed.

Perhaps this famous oracle hints at a Judaeo-Christian understanding of God's attitude to violence. God plants with justice in mind, God longs for it, God desires it; we might even say God works for it and expects it, but too often God finds only violence. And the Christian tradition has always struggled to account for violence. Indeed, there is a reluctance among many of us, particularly those who are most active in opposing violence, and those who have been its victims, to acknowledge that violence can be understood or may have some social purpose. There is an understandable desire to see it as an aberration, as pointless, as something without a meaning. Any attempt to explain it or account for it is seen as collusion with it.

This essay discusses the relationship between violence and two themes not always or readily associated with it: covetousness and story. It will try to show that these are in fact closely related. It will argue that our failure to understand these connections is playing a part in producing a culture that is ignorant of the effects of its dismissal of traditional taboos, and in which the aspiration for peace appears to have little meaning or content. It will conclude that a meaningful alternative to violence and covetousness can be found in the emulation of Jesus.

Of course, violence is not necessarily easy to define. Do we reserve the term *violence* for those acts of force which are regarded as illegitimate? Or

does it include actions by the state and state agencies which are taken, allegedly at least, for the good of society as a whole? Can the term *violence* be interpreted broadly so that it includes conflict of the kinds which fall short of physical violence or which might result in physical violence? This paper adopts a broad definition because it is concerned with the cultural contexts of violence and the underlying causes of violence, rather than with defining what is and is not the legitimate use of force or in what circumstances, if any, war is justified. It is concerned with the types of conflict which have the potential to generate violence rather than with violence *per se*. I want to suggest that violence is a distortion of a phenomenon which is built into the fabric of the universe and that the distortion has its roots in the way that human desire has been fashioned.

Violence in contemporary Western culture

Violence appears unpopular; it has no advocates. Nearly everyone claims to be against it. Yet it pervades human culture and we struggle to account for it. We panic about its perceived increase. We denounce it vigorously at every turn. But violence, or the fear of it, will not go away. We stir up our collective *angst* with tales of gun crime, carjacking, road rage, muggings for mobiles, child kidnappings, robberies motivated by addiction to hard drugs, bullying in the playground and the workplace, football hooliganism, hazing, and terrorist atrocities.

Our culture fears violence. We are thoroughly sensitised to it. Acts of violence, such as clips round the ear by police officers, corporal punishment by teachers, or smacking by parents, all of which would have been regarded as banal a few decades ago, now lead to criminal charges. Yet our culture continues to glorify violence. Popular art from the comic book via the computer game to the feature film has violence as one of its major themes. We fear it and yet we are fascinated by it. It repels us and yet it attracts us. We hate it but it seems that we cannot live without it.²

Violence, story and meaning

In an extract from his book *Letters to a young contrarian*, the journalist Christopher Hitchens cites these words of Aldous Huxley with approval,

‘Homer was wrong,’ wrote Heracleitus of Ephesus, ‘Homer was wrong in saying: “Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!” He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away.’³

It seems a reasonable enough prayer to us. A spirited pagan version of the bland prayer for peace offered so often in our churches as an intercession for the world. After all, we may not know much but we know that war is bad and peace is good. We know what we ought to be against and we are against violence.

But our prayers and longings for peace are often naïve and inadequate. One of the problems is that it is so hard to imagine. Perhaps the noblest vision of everlasting peace, one where every source of strife is removed, is found in the Book of Revelation. Yet the vision is couched in fantastical language. The vision offers us something that is beyond our powers to envisage. The heavenly Jerusalem is shaped like a cube. Its walls are fifteen hundred miles high and seventy-five yards thick. On each side are 12 gates each made of a single pearl. The gates are always open; they are open all day and there is no night.⁴ The seer has no language to describe the home of God and God’s people at the end of history other than the nonsensical, absurd or fanciful. It is beyond human words or capacity to envision.

The Old Testament visions of peace are more literal and correspondingly less effective. They function well as inspiring poetry, which is, I suppose, their primary purpose, but will not do as a focus for long-term human aspiration. You plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit;⁵ you get to sit under your own fig tree;⁶ the wild and domestic animals get on famously.⁷ But then what? It seems so dull, so boring. There’s no challenge, no excitement, no risk, no nothing. In these circumstances we can imagine no story; and without a story we have no meaning. Homer may have yearned for strife to end but had his prayer been answered there would have been nothing for him to write. No dispute between Greece and Troy, no anger between Achilles and Agamemnon, no malefactors preventing Odysseus from returning to his home, and no

suitors competing for Penelope when he got there.

Strife, conflict and dispute are integral to the stories humans tell and to the activities in which we engage. Take them away and we struggle to think of anything meaningful. Take them away and you lose everything from sport to intellectual enquiry. There is a marvellous moment in David Lodge's novel *Small World* when a young academic attending a major language and literature conference asks a question of a panel of distinguished literary critics called together to discuss the function of criticism. He says, 'What follows if everybody agrees with you?', subsequently clarified as 'What do you *do* if everybody agrees with you?' The chair of the panel, the doyen of literary critics, sees the point, 'You imply, of course, that what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game.'⁸ In other words, once the critics agree, there is an end to dialogue and to dispute. The discipline is finished. It is strife which keeps the participants involved. Sweet agreement comes only with the eschaton.

In fact, try as we might, there are few things which give humans pleasure in which there is not some degree of conflict or strife to be overcome. All kinds of folk wisdom confirm this, 'Easy come, easy go', 'faint heart never won fair lady'. We all know that the thing that we truly value, an object, a skill, is the one we have had to strive for. To tell humans not to struggle is to tell us not to be human. And so there is perhaps a problem at the heart of the aspiration for peace.

What stories could be told about people who live in peace? Even television series about happy families in apparently peaceful communities, such as *The Waltons* or *The Little House on the Prairie* rely on strife within or without the family to provide a catalyst for their narratives. Otherwise nothing would happen at all. A soap opera in which all the characters were polite and got on well with one another is unimaginable. There would be no story, nothing would ever happen, and nobody would watch.

Ancient art bears out these observations. The stories, the things represented in art, are violent. If they are not about violence, they are about sex. And if they are about sex they are often about illegitimate sex; adultery, promiscuity, incest, rape; the kinds of sex which involve or provoke conflict. Sex, violence or both; perhaps Freud was not mistaken in regarding the story of Oedipus as archetypal.

Some literary critics have recognised that narrative requires conflict of some kind. Eagleton states that 'the pattern of classical narrative is that an original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored.'⁹ Without disruption of some sort there is no story to tell. Todorov reaches a similar conclusion in the course of his work on fantasy literature. He discusses 'the very nature of narrative' and concludes that 'all narrative is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical.' The beginning presents a stable situation and then something happens which introduces disequilibrium. Then there is transition and at the end a new equilibrium is established. Todorov claims that 'every narrative includes this fundamental schema'¹⁰. The introduction of disequilibrium is part of the fundamental structure of narrative.

As Hitchens points out, this is recognised within the Hindu tradition. The aspiration to strifeless perfection is the aspiration to annihilation. Nirvana, the goal to which the devout strive, is nothingness. In a similar way some parts of the Buddhist tradition advocate the abandonment of desire. If we desire nothing, we are at peace, we provoke no conflict. There is no story.

There are, of course, lots of stories told by and about peacemakers. However, they tend to be about the way in which greater justice was obtained through a conflict waged using non-violent methods. The cases of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi are cited with approval. We look in vain for stories where peace is the content rather than the goal.

So, where do we look for a story where peace is the content? At first sight the Christian tradition offers us very little. The standard imagery associated with a strife free and heavenly afterlife is highly unsatisfactory. It works well at one level. It provides something to look forward to when trials will be over and some well-earned rest will be enjoyed. But it begs the question of what to do when you have enjoyed all the rest you want and are looking round for something to happen.

The novelist Julian Barnes takes on this issue in the closing pages of *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. The protagonist dies and finds himself in an eternity of wish fulfilment. He eats delicious food, has sex with beautiful women and gets so good at golf that he regularly completes a round in just 18 shots. After an era or two it all starts to get boring until he reaches the point where non-being seems preferable to being. There is nothing left to achieve, nothing left to overcome. Pointlessness and *ennui* overtake him.

Christians have too often asked how violence might be overcome and all-too rarely wondered what would be left if it was. Violence and strife are the

presumed context for everything from ancient myths of creation to contemporary post-Nietzschean social theory.¹¹ If we overcome violence are we left with the options of boredom and annihilation? Perhaps what we need is some renewed concept of conflict or challenge which is real but which does not generate violence. Humans need conflict or something to overcome, but it is this very need which can become the precursor of violence. This means we may need to discover or to recover a form of desire that does not generate the kinds of competition that are often currently resolved through violence or the threat of violence.

Covetousness and violence¹²

The Christian tradition appears to be at odds with other great religious traditions on the nature of desire and of the content of the goal of humanity. The Church's goal is not annihilation but the Kingdom of God and this is understood to be the realm of perfect peace. However, this peace is understood to have a context and some content. It is the location of true human being. It is usually understood in terms of our deepest desires being transformed and then met and fulfilled, rather than in their being annihilated. Our deepest desire is to be the desire for God. Some other desires may need to be sublimated, but this desire at least is understood to be good and wholesome.

The Christian meta-narrative suggests that humans were made for relationship with God, that humans disrupted this relationship and consequently their own and God's relationship with the rest of creation, that God has acted in Jesus Christ to restore this relationship, and that everything will culminate in a restored humanity, in a restored creation. In this story, desire plays a vital role, both in making things go wrong and in sorting them out once more.

According to Genesis 1, the world God made, and which God repeatedly declared to be good, was a place in which work needed to be done. Within the original mandate to humans was the call to 'subdue' the earth.¹³ This implies a degree of conflict. Creation needed some part of itself, humanity, to act as God's representatives in keeping it under control, in imposing order. Only subsequently does this task become distorted so that humans commit violence. Purpose, desire, conflict were all part of the original intention. It is this phenomenon which has become distorted by the way human

desire has been fashioned.

It is very difficult to know how this prelapsarian subjection should be understood. Perhaps it is a continuing participation in God's work of imposing order on chaos; this might be understood in terms of the imposition of culture, the practice of cultivation, the herding of animals and so on. These things involve a degree of what we now call violence. This prelapsarian proto-violence becomes distorted as a result of the fall, it lapses into violence because human covetousness leads to the refocusing of desire. Humans become unable or unwilling to exercise adequate control of the actions necessarily involved in subjection. This idea that the distortion of a necessary human activity leads to violence can function whether we understand the fall as an historical event, as a mythical representation of something which occurred among our ancestors, or as myth.

The present human context is one in which desire is distorted and its most common representations are idolatrous and covetous. It is therefore very difficult to imagine what proto-violence might mean. It is more straightforward in the case of care for the environment, farming, gardening and so on than it is within human relations. Nevertheless, we have the capacity to envisage loving relationships based on mutuality and reciprocity even if we have not experienced them in a pure and enduring form.¹⁴

Christian theology, taking its lead from the Apostle Paul, particularly as interpreted by Augustine, has tended to trace humanity's broken relationship with God to the story in Genesis 3 in which Eve and Adam eat the fruit which God had forbidden to them.¹⁵ In the Genesis account, the serpent tempts Eve with the thought that consuming the forbidden fruit will make her Godlike. There is transgression of a given law, there is, I suppose, theft, but the root issue seems to be one of covetousness.¹⁶ The first humans lose their initial status because they desire something which belongs to another. And the motive for the desire is not for the fruit itself but for what the fruit represents. To possess the fruit which belongs to another is to seek to acquire the status of the other. That is, to be like God.

This distortion of desire into covetousness continues apace in contemporary advertising. Products are very rarely advertised on the basis of what they can do. More often a model is depicted owning and using the product. The model is presented as someone worthy of emulation. Indeed as someone whose being is to be desired. The product, then, is to be seen not as something worth having in its own right, but as a means of acquiring the being of

the model. Of course the process is illusory. The acquisition of the product does not result in the acquisition of another's being. And naturally the consumer is left unsatisfied. This is all to the good from the perspective of the advertiser for the consumer's desire for being can be tantalised in subsequent advertisements. Essentially, advertisements are designed to provoke covetousness in the viewer. In our culture the most common use of representation is advertising and the purpose of advertising is to stimulate desire. Most advertisements are incitements to covetousness. They do not appear to be such because the apparent object of desire is not the possession of a neighbour. However, the means they use to encourage desire for a product is to provoke desire for the being of the model. This is like the offence of Adam and Eve and is the essence of covetousness.

The offence of Adam and Eve was not in itself a violent one, but according to the writer or compiler of Genesis, its consequences are undoubtedly violent; the covetous act is the precursor of violence. Cain envies the fact that his brother's sacrifice was acceptable to God and murders him. The presence of violence within the culture leads to the celebration of violence which reaches its nadir in the spiteful boasting of Lamech.¹⁷ In the preamble to the story of the flood, the sons of God covet and then acquire the fair daughters of men for their wives.¹⁸ Whatever the story may be about, covetousness has now reached a cosmic dimension. The humans are said to be wicked but the only way the nature of this evil is specified is that we are told that the earth was filled with violence.¹⁹ Covetousness and violence go hand in hand.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that an injunction against covetousness should find its way into the Decalogue. Nevertheless, the tenth commandment strikes 21st century ears as strange and out of place. It attempts to prohibit a personal disposition which need not lead to any harmful action. Of itself, it leaves no evidence. It would be almost impossible to prove in a court of law unless the covetous one confessed. Unlike most of the other commandments, particularly those others which deal with relations between humans, the order not to covet would have been virtually impossible to enforce.

Furthermore, we live in a culture in which covetousness is no longer seen as being taboo. Indeed it is provoked and encouraged in advertising. The viewer is encouraged to desire something which is not theirs. Our desire for things, expressed in consumption, is the engine which drives the market economy. The consumer is to aspire to possess things which will bestow or

enhance a sense of being. In these days of the mass production of identical items, it is possible for many people to possess the same object. Covetousness can be provoked without being seen to be promoting conflict or violence. However, the psychological and social effects of the promotion of the idea that we lack being and the false suggestion that this lack can be remedied by shopping are difficult to predict. Furthermore, where the advertising of the west is seen in the south, desire is provoked, but there are often no means by which the objects of desire may legitimately be acquired. The poor are excluded from the game. This has the potential to unleash an unstoppable violence.

There are powerful reasons why the ancient taboo against covetousness has disintegrated. In the ancient world there was only one of anything. Products were not mass produced. One pot or sword or donkey could be distinguished from all others. If you desired something possessed by your neighbour, you could not go to the shop and choose an identical one from the shelf. Your options were to overcome the covetousness or to steal it. Industrialisation and mass advertising have changed this completely.

The breakdown of taboos on covetousness is extending into sex. Perhaps this was inevitable once the old taboos against covetousness and against the inciting of desire disintegrated in the face of the requirements of industrial capitalism. Covetousness is incited in pornography which is becoming so commonplace as to be regarded by many as a mainstream art form. Models and actors in magazines, film and television use body language that incites sexual desire in the viewer. Of course the models are dehumanised in the process so that they are interchangeable. They are objects of desire, but not personal. There is no reason to desire any one of them rather than the other. They have become commodities. While this phenomenon is sometimes condemned by anti-pornography activists, and sometimes by the models themselves (nobody treats me as a person), it offers some defence against the provocation to desire being understood personally. Where this defence does break down, as it inevitably must because the boundaries involved are so ambiguous, those who misunderstand the nature of the signals being sent engage in celebrity fixation, stalking and related activities. The communications media claim the right to freely represent whatever they choose but deny any responsibility for the consequences that are provoked. This is the issue satirised by Ben Elton in his novel *Popcorn*. Elton, of course, denies that his point is to argue in favour of censorship.

So, covetousness (desire for something which we do not own or for someone who is not our legitimate sexual partner) drives global capitalism and yet is prohibited by the tenth commandment because of its propensity to provoke violence. Indeed, there is a sense in which covetousness is to be understood as the most common motive for breaking of the previous four commandments; those against murder, adultery, theft and the bearing of false witness. Of course, these four offences commonly lead to violence as retribution is sought. In other words the injunction against covetousness is an injunction against the human emotion which most often provokes violence. The final commandment seeks to prohibit the form of desire which could become the motive for the preceding four.

It is possible that the Apostle Paul understood covetousness to be the heart of the human dilemma. Certainly, when he discusses the Law in Romans 7, it is the commandment against covetousness which is taken as the epitome of the Law.²⁰ And it is covetousness which introduces sin into the world.

Desire is part of human make up. At its best it is the desire for a relationship with God and participation in God's own creativity. This desire is distorted and becomes covetousness. Humans seek to acquire the being of God, and hence to control God. The search for God then readily becomes idolatrous as it focuses on the self and upon those who claim the attributes of God.²¹

The end of the world as we know it

I have argued that desire (or covetousness) can produce conflict and that conflict produces story and meaning. In contrast with those other religious traditions which seek fulfilment in the abandonment of desire (a goal not dissimilar to those commonly assumed to be found in some Christian ascetic traditions), Christianity does not seek to overcome desire. In contrast to secular materialism, or postmodernism, or whatever other name you may wish to give to the cultural norms generated by the current manifestations of western capitalism, Christianity does not teach that all desires are to be indulged. (Or rather, to put it into political and economic terms, that our main right as humans is that of choice; our choice being which limited number of our unlimited desires we will indulge with our limited resources.) Instead the Judaeo-

Christian tradition distinguishes between different kinds of desire. Those which constitute covetousness are prohibited. Others are to be enjoyed. However, all are to be understood in the light of a prior commitment to desire God and his will. As Jesus expresses it, 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness'.²²

In the gospels, Jesus displays a form of humanity which is without covetousness. This aspect of the story reaches its climax in the garden of Gethsemane. Here Jesus demonstrates a desire for God which overcomes even his love for his own life. Speaking of his own death he says, 'take this cup from me, yet not what I desire, but what you desire'.²³ We are not, I think, to understand that God desires the death of Jesus, still less that God kills him, rather that God desires from him an obedience which will result in his being killed by others.²⁴ The submission of human desire to the desire of God is the heart of the achievement of Jesus. The consequence is his exaltation to God's right hand. Adam and Eve's goal of attaining the being of God is achieved by Jesus. It is done by a human who submits his desire to God rather than by those who embraced covetousness in the vain hope that it would make them Godlike.

Similar ideas are pursued in the Book of Revelation. Jesus is depicted as the faithful one and this is understood as being obedient in the face of death. The text calls on its readers to imitate this achievement. The victorious are those who 'did not cling to life even in the face of death'.²⁵ It is this which gives rise to a new creation in which God dwells with humanity. This motif of obedience or of the subjection of the Christian's will to that of God, is not to be understood as a demand for uniformity. The fact that the model to be emulated is Jesus is not to be read as a demand that all his followers be male, or Jewish, or from Nazareth. Revelation itself is clear about this, referring to the humans whose home is with God it says, 'They will be his peoples'.²⁶ The plural suggests that human diversity is a significant part of the vision. Rather it is covetousness which abolishes difference as people desire the things which belong to one another. Covetousness drives the breaking down of human diversity by the processes we know as globalisation. The Biblical prohibition of covetousness helps to sustain difference.

In Revelation God's enemy is depicted as mimicking God, as pretending to have acquired his being. Satan in Revelation is the epitome of covetousness; the dragon seeks the being and the status of God. The beast's description at 17:8 (it was and is not and is to come) parodies that of God²⁷. Satan is

seen to covet the being of God and to claim things which are rightfully God's. It may not be too much to understand the casting of Satan into the lake of fire as including the destruction of the source of covetousness itself.

Protology and Eschatology

The creation depicted within Genesis 1-2 is not static, there is space for human development and creativity; humans are set on a journey into God. The goal we are offered in Christ does not take us back to Eden where we started but forward to the original goal for which we were made. A place where our wills are made perfect but in which desire for God and to participate with God in his acts and his creativity drives human development. There remains space for creativity and learning and challenge. Eternity is dynamic. After the eschaton we share in divine life and creativity. We remain human even as we participate more and more in the being of God. Just as prelapsarian humanity experienced desire and meaning and a form of conflict which did not necessarily become distorted into covetousness and so generate violence, so the ultimately redeemed humanity will experience desire, story and meaning. The desire will be for God and will remain undistorted so that it does not lapse into covetousness and become again the progenitor of violence.

These thoughts bring us back to traditional images of eternity where heaven is presented as a place of rest or of worship. These tend to be boring, static and unsatisfying. Paul Fiddes, building on the imagery of Revelation 21 and 22 proposes some solution. The end of strife should offer both closure and openness. The end is not an ending as such but is when we move and dwell in God. The open-gated city of the new Jerusalem promises a place of journeys, adventures and homecomings.²⁸ The purpose of all this is to become ever more and more engaged in the dance which is the very life of the Triune God. In other words, the story continues and has the capacity for infinite variation and engagement. It is a journey into God and it is driven by a desire for God which has overcome all other desires. Revelation 21 and 22 offer the possibility of a dynamic human community in which there is no covetousness or idolatry. This essay suggests that desire and conflict will be necessary in this context if it is to be an environment in which we can be fully human. This conflict may generate something akin to the prelapsarian proto-violence discussed above. If heaven is a place of transformation, there

is no certainty that all humans will be transformed at the same rate. No doubt we will take delight in the progress of our neighbours rather than following Cain into envy with its capacity to engender violence even against our brother or sister.

But even here violence, or its memory, is not lost completely. The risen Jesus who appeared to the apostles was recognisable because of his wounds.²⁹ Christian devotion insists that Jesus still bears the marks of these injuries, though they have been transformed: 'those wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified'³⁰, and 'The dear tokens of His passion Still His dazzling body bears'³¹; They are constant reminders of human violence and its eternal consequences. As such, they are a way of permanently ensuring that the memory of violence is a part of divine and heavenly reality and experience. This is the violence, founded in covetousness, which Jesus refused to respond to, absorbing it and disabling it, yet which has marked him forever. This heavenly acknowledgement of the reality of violence may offer us the prospect of an eternal context for meaning and narrative. Or to use traditional language, our salvation depends on Jesus forever pleading for us on the basis of his death for us. These reminders of our past in covetousness and violence will add colour and depth to the experience of the eternal journey motivated by our transformed desire for God.

Conclusion

God looks to his vineyard to produce justice but all too often only violence is found. The roots of this violence lie in the distortion of human desire for God into idolatry and covetousness. One means by which this may be addressed is through the adoption of an *imitatio Christi* for in Jesus of Nazareth we find a human life which manifests an undistorted desire for God with no hint of covetousness. From the wealth of Jewish teaching on the true way to be human he chooses to stress the commands to fully love God, which addresses the issue of idolatry and to love one's neighbour as oneself, which addresses the problem of covetousness. The future which Jesus offers is not best understood in the traditional language of rest but as one in which desire and story remain but in such ways that the conflict generated is of a kind which does not lead to violence. God will come in search of justice and find right relationships and fulfilled humans. The only hints of bloodshed will be in the

memory of past violence and these will be focussed on the wounds of Jesus, the forerunner of renewed humanity.

Notes

¹ Isaiah 5:1-7

² These are characteristics which it shares with another social phenomenon. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, (Oxford: OUP, 1950) suggests that primitive experience about the realm of the sacred was of both great attraction and great fear.

³ *The Guardian Saturday Review*, November 10 2001, p. 3

⁴ Revelation 21:10-27. The seer may have in mind a gigantic version of the central part of the Jerusalem Temple.

⁵ Isaiah 65:21.

⁶ Micah 4:4.

⁷ Isaiah 1: 6-9.

⁸ David Lodge, *Small World*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p. 319.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) p. 185.

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) pp. 163-165.

¹¹ See the discussion in John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, Blackwell 1993).

¹² In this section, as elsewhere, I draw on the ideas of René Girard. He uses the term *mimetic desire* to speak of the human propensity to desire things owned or desired by others. In this paper I use the biblical term covetousness to mean the same or a related idea.

¹³ Genesis 1:28.

¹⁴ Perhaps it would be possible to draw on ideas about *liminality* found in the work of social and cultural anthropologists in order to develop an idea of what proto-violence might be like. Liminal experiences are non-hierarchical, rewarding, transforming and temporary. They cannot be made to endure. Nevertheless, liminal groups can and do overcome disagreement in pursuing group aims and do so, for a time at least, without resort to violence or the threat of violence. The joy found by the participants in the new form of relationship with others gives those others a value which has yet to be undermined by covetousness. Without covetousness it might be possible for liminal relationships to endure indefinitely.

¹⁵ Romans 5:12-21. This story may also form the background to the apostle's thought in Romans 1:18-32.

¹⁶ Augustine's idea of concupiscence is often read as sexual desire. In fact it may be close to a desire for things it would be wiser not to possess which is similar to covetousness.

¹⁷ Genesis 4:23-24.

¹⁸ Genesis 6:1-2.

¹⁹ Genesis 6:11.

²⁰ Romans 7:7.

²¹ These issues are explored by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1. These reflections may help us to link the thoughts of Romans 1 and Romans 7.

²² Matthew 6:33.

²³ Mark 14:36 and parallels.

²⁴ A similar understanding of the death of Jesus is explored in Anthony Clarke's essay elsewhere in this collection.

²⁵ Revelation 12:11.

²⁶ Revelation 21:3. The alternative reading gives the singular but the plural, the more difficult reading, is more likely to be original.

²⁷ Revelation 1:4.

²⁸ Paul S Fiddes, *The Promised End; Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p. 287

²⁹ John 20:27.

³⁰ Matthew Bridges, Godfrey Thring, 'Crown him with many crowns' in *Baptist Praise and Worship*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991), No. 37.

³¹ Charles Wesley, 'Lo! he comes' in *Rejoice and Sing*, melody edition, (Oxford: OUP, 1991), No. 656.

Violence and the Cross: God and the Death of Jesus

Anthony Clarke

Introduction

The evangelist is now in full swing and builds his impassioned pleading to a climax. He takes, from behind the lectern, a piece of wood, a hammer and some nails, and with no further words beats the nails into the wood with powerful blows. The congregation look on in silence, some entranced by the re-enactment, others inwardly squirming at the suggested pain. "This," the evangelist declares, "is how Jesus died."

We may have seen such a visual explanation of the cross, or even used something similar ourselves. We may have more creatively sought the involvement of a congregation by encouraging them to strike their own nail into a wooden cross, thus, even in a somewhat removed fashion, participating in the violence of the event. Such illustrations, though, pale into insignificance, in the light of Mel Gibson's new film *The Passion of the Christ*. Here the violence endured by Jesus, before and during crucifixion, is graphically portrayed in a way that has never been done before. Some will leave the film feeling, quite literally, sick. But what, theologically, are we to make of the violence of the cross?

As *The Passion of the Christ* portrays, the death of Jesus was a very violent act, for the excruciating pain involved in such Roman executions was intended to act as a deterrent as well as a punishment. Yet it was not a death that Jesus had sought to avoid. Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem and arrives in time for the Passover festival, with a clear expectation of what would face him there if he continued on his set course. Yet in amongst the heady atmosphere of a fervent Jerusalem, in Gethsemane, Jesus reaches his own point of crisis, a moment that is without doubt a high point in the drama. On his own

with even his closest friends at a distance, Jesus pleads that this looming shadow might instead pass by: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.'¹ And Jesus waits in the silence. What conclusions can we legitimately draw from this plea of Jesus and the apparent absence of an answer? What is certain is that this window into the very passion of Jesus asks a more fundamental question still. What was the role of God in the violent death of Jesus? The relating of God to violence and the debate concerning a violent God is raised by many passages within the Bible, and is intensified by our experience of the world, but is most crucially provoked by the death of Jesus, for this is the relationship in which Jesus knew God as Father and God declared Jesus to be God's Son. Where was God in the silence?

Lucan Narrative

In the drama of the Gospel passion narratives, God is only ever glimpsed in the background of the stage. The spotlight falls on human actors and actions, and it is this very humanity of Jesus, struggling with his God, that demands our attention. Yet it is not a godless drama – Christian theology has always echoed the words of the centurion at the cross and insisted that this is a supreme moment of divine revelation – even if we only sense God in the shadows of the narrative. The questions of God's presence and role in this violent event become ever more pressing. And they begin to be answered in other parts of the New Testament.

Luke himself points towards an answer in the Acts of the Apostles. Here he portrays for us a very clear antithesis, repeated on several occasions: the Jews killed Jesus, but God raised him from the dead.² In fact this contrast is often more sharply pointed, for it always occurs in Acts in the sermons and prayers of the early Church leaders. So we read in direct challenge to the Jewish leaders, '*you* killed him, but God raised him from the dead.'³ Luke's message is clear, for the human action of crucifying Jesus is contrasted with the divine action of raising him from the dead. God's role in the crucifixion of Jesus is to confound it in the resurrection. God protests against the violence inflicted on Jesus and recreates that which the violence has destroyed.

Yet while this stark antithesis presents a clear and decisive role for God, it is further complicated, even compromised, by being placed within a wider

notion of the plan of God. Three short passages from Acts express this most clearly:

‘This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to a cross. But God raised him from the dead...’ (Acts 2:23)

‘Now, brothers and sisters, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer.’ (Acts 3:17-18)

‘Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.’ (Acts 4:27-8)

God clearly responds to the death of Jesus by raising him to life again, but according to Luke, God’s involvement goes much deeper, for Jesus’ death is part of a wider divine plan. Words such as ‘δει’ (it is necessary and ‘βουλή’ (will / plan), although found throughout the New Testament are used more extensively in Luke-Acts, and it is widely recognised that there is a strong emphasis on this theme of necessity and the ‘plan of God’ throughout Luke’s writing. Thus ‘δει’ is a key word throughout Luke-Acts, although with a wide range of meanings, applied to both God and human beings, driving the narrative on. In this light, John Squires suggests three levels of narrative both in the Gospel and in Acts.⁴ First there is the basic narrative itself as the actions of Jesus and the early Church are recorded. Secondly at a deeper level these events happen under the guidance of God, as the emphasis on the role of the Spirit, the use of the Old Testament, the appearance of divine agents and the occurrence of miracles show. But at a third level the events can be understood as the plan of God, or ‘all that God has done.’⁵

Luke, then, has a complex understanding of the events he records in both the Gospel and the Acts, in which God and human beings are involved as actors. And within this complexity his emphasis on the ‘plan of God’ helps join together various strands into a coherent whole, most notably, in Acts, the passion of Jesus and the mission to the Gentiles. Although there is this breadth in Luke’s use of both the overarching theme of necessity and the specific language, the strongest statements all refer to Jesus’ death on the cross.

How can we understand the cross as the plan of God, on the one hand in relation to the acts of human beings who kill Jesus, and on the other in relation to the violence at its centre?

First, there is no overarching theology of predestination working through Luke's writing, and Luke does not present us with a deterministic relationship between God and the world, in which history is simply the outworking of a divine decree. Luke's understanding of the will of God is much more nuanced. C H Cosgrove, for example, 'excludes notions of a closed, casually-connected history process'⁶ and concludes that there is no systematic concept of divine predestination, but rather an unreflective understanding of divine providence. One factor in this debate is the wider setting and cultural background of Luke's work. Is he working with a strongly Old Testament background with its concept of the direct actions of a personal God, or a Hellenistic background with its stress on a fixed and unfathomable fate? Both Cosgrove and Squires attempt a middle path between those who have taken the extreme positions, although Squires accepts a much greater Hellenistic and particularly Stoic influence on Luke, and suggests that Luke is attempting to 'translate' the story of Jesus into a new context, that it might be both accepted and understood. Whatever the exact balance between Old Testament and Stoic influences, what is more important is the use Luke makes of this matrix of ideas such as necessity and plan, and here we see that the plan of God allows space for movement. Luke allows the possibility that the will of God can be frustrated. So, for example, the Pharisees reject the will, 'την βουλην', of God for themselves by refusing to accept the baptism of John.⁷ God's will is not entirely fixed, for there is space for rejection. In addition, there is no clear soteriology linked to the death of Jesus on the cross, and even the hints in Mark's Gospel, that Jesus would give himself as a 'ransom for many'⁸ find no place in Luke.

Secondly, it is abundantly clear that God is not the only actor in the drama. Despite the impression we are given that the crucifixion of Jesus is a working out of already decided events, Jesus is not a 'passive pawn'⁹ in the plan of God. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus himself goes into the wilderness, whereas for Mark he is driven, he sets his face to Jerusalem, provocatively enters it on a donkey and causes a commotion in the Temple. Similarly he rejects the disciples' desire to call down fire on Samaria, take up swords, or fight their way out of Gethsemane. Jesus himself determines to walk the way of the cross, and in a particular Lucan emphasis, Jesus is obedient to the plan

of Scripture rather than just aware of it.¹⁰ A similar pattern is also detected in the presentation of Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Whereas Paul sees his life guided by the divine 'must' arising from his conversion experience, which will lead him to testify at Rome, this journey to Caesar is equally Paul's decision and he acts to bring it about. Luke presents a real interplay between the divine and the human.

Nor is it the case that human freedom is simply added as a counterweight to divine sovereignty. In fact it appears that Luke's use of the divine plan motif provides a balance to what he believes to be very human actions. The bald statement of Peter that God raised the one whom they crucified could suggest that God simply reacted to human events, putting right, in this case, what the Jewish leaders had done wrong. That the resurrection of the crucified Jesus might thus have been a random event, is clearly something that Luke wishes to avoid, and thus a stress on the wider plan of God. In the light of these general comments on Luke's Gospel, what are we to make of the role of God in the violent death of Jesus suggested by the three passages we quoted?

In Acts 2:23, the will of God – that is fixed and foreknown – is that Jesus is handed over. The word 'ἐκδοτον' is found only here in the New Testament, and its meaning here has some ambiguity. Should we read it in a more positive or more negative sense? Is it a giving up or a handing over? The verb is passive and left without a subject. Who is doing the giving up or handing over? Do we read here an echo of the actions of Judas, or the Jewish authorities or Pilate? Could it possibly refer to God giving up God's Son? The stress of the sentence lies clearly in the main verb 'you killed the one given up', in which the giving up seems to have a very general meaning and takes a subordinate role. The emphasis is, thus, on the role of the Jewish authorities in the killing of Jesus. In the light of this, it would seem to make more sense to take God as the implied subject of the passive verb, which would have a positive meaning to contrast with the stress on crucifixion. Rather than the NIV's 'handed over to you', the 'to you' being added to the original text presumably to suggest that the action was performed by God, although leaving open the possibility of an alternative interpretation, Luke's meaning would be 'You killed the one whom God gave up in his own purpose and foreknowledge.'

In Acts 3:18 we read that, *this is how* God fulfilled those things God spoke through all the prophets that God's Christ would suffer. The adverb

‘οὕτως’, translated ‘this is how’, can refer both forward or backward in the passage, but since Peter in his speech immediately begins to exhort the crowd to repent, it necessarily looks back. Once again, Peter has just forcefully stressed how they handed Jesus over, rejected and killed him. It was in the very actions of the Jewish leaders, says Peter, that God fulfilled the words of the prophets. The exact balance between divine and human action is left very unclear.

Finally Acts 4:27-8: Herod and Pilate met with the gentiles and the people of Israel to do everything that your hand and will had already fixed. Although the language used is familiar there is still some ambiguity in meaning. The text seems to imply quite clearly that everything that God had planned happened through the actions of Herod and Pilate and others. But should we read from the text that everything which Herod and Pilate did was actually preordained by God? In other words, is the stress on the way human actions fulfilled God’s wider plan, thus echoing Acts 3:18? Or is the emphasis on God controlling human actions, so that Herod and Pilate were merely following a divine script. From what we have seen so far, the former is more in tune with Luke’s overall thinking. What exactly, then, was preordained by God? The only answer Luke gives is the ambiguous ‘given up’ of 2:23.

It would seem that Luke’s use of the plan and will of God is both general and complex. Luke conveys the fact that God is an actor in the drama, involved in these events which are therefore not random chance. The particular role that God plays is not specified, for those speeches in Acts which speak of the set will of God use different phrases to describe the passion, but in very general terms. It is also a drama that involves other people, who choose to obey or to disobey, who make their own decisions and choices, and who are accountable for their own actions. It would seem that such phrases as ‘βουλή’ and ‘δὲι’ convey something of the overall purpose of God, rather than a predetermined and unmoveable set of events. The language of Luke speaks of the sovereignty of God, and thus confirms faith and encourages mission, but allows space for human freedom. For Luke, the death of Jesus was clearly within the plan of God, although God did reverse the human act of crucifixion. But a more precise account of God’s role in the violent death of Jesus is left open.

Pauline Exegesis

We might, then, look for further reflection on the role of God's involvement in the cross, by turning to Pauline interpretation. Although much of the narrative detail of the Gospels is left on one side, the cross is clearly of central significance for Paul, who offers an exegesis of the cross with a much greater emphasis on soteriology. God is deeply involved in the death of Jesus. The most graphic connection between God and the cross comes in Colossians 2:14:

'God forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.'

This, of course, is highly metaphorical language. In the death of Christ God nails a written account of our sin to the cross. But what part does Paul conceive for God in the actual death of Jesus? Three much debated passages are central to this issue.

'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement...' (Romans 3:25)

'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...' (2 Corinthians 5:21)

'God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all...' (Romans 8:32)

God presents, makes and gives up.

The context of Romans 3:25 is clearly cultic and draws from an Old Testament background of sacrifice, although the exact interpretation that should be given to the various words in this verse has been long contended. 'προεθετο' could be translated either 'purposed' or 'presented', but either way the stress is on God's provision of a sacrifice, that it was God's initiative. Dunn suggests that Paul's concern may be to make this emphasis in contrast to the probably older antithesis we have already found in Acts 'you killed him, but God raised him from the dead. More problematic is the word 'ἱλαστήριον' translated quite diversely in modern Bibles, based, it would seem, quite considerably on the particular theological understanding of the translator. Does it draw its meaning from the Septuagint where it almost al-

ways is accompanied by the definite article, or is its anarthrous use here more ambiguous? Is it a place where sins are forgiven or the means by which they are forgiven? And most critically does it refer to expiation or propitiation?

It is at this point that prior theological convictions often take over. Cranfield, for example, having first established to his own satisfaction, that only some understanding of propitiation would be acceptable, dismisses all translations that exclude any propitiatory meaning without further discussion.¹² The problem, as far as our discussion is concerned, is the nature of God that is thereby assumed. So Cranfield concludes, 'God proposed to direct against his own self in the person of his Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved.'¹³ Although the spectre of God punishing Jesus is avoided by the trinitarian language, we are still left with a God who acts violently against God's self.

The only way forward may be to admit that on the basis of the text itself it is impossible to give a more precise interpretation, but to agree with C K Barrett that we can go no further with certainty than to translate this verse as 'God set forth Christ as the means of dealing with sin.'¹⁴ Further meaning can only be found in a wide theological consideration of the whole meaning of the cross.

The condensed but stark language of 2 Corinthians 5:21 has also been taken by some to indicate a cultic context, in effect God made Christ a sin offering. Others find that in a context that employs the concepts of reconciliation and justification (so Victor Furnish)¹⁵ and that the failure to use the preposition 'περι' as in Romans 8:3 (so Margaret Thrall)¹⁶ the meaning of a 'sin-offering' is quite foreign. Thrall argues that Paul is thinking relationally, not culticly; Christ suffered as though he were a sinner. She quotes C K Barrett approvingly:

'He came to stand in the relation with God which normally is the result of sin, estranged from God and the object of his wrath.'¹⁷

Barrett though has neatly turned the active verb of the text into a much more gentle passive: 'He came to stand'. In similar vein, Thrall, in arguing for her non-cultic interpretation quotes a number of early Fathers in support. She summarises Chrysostom's argument as 'God allowed Christ to be condemned and to die as one who was cursed.'¹⁸ The language of 'allowing', however, is Thrall's and not Chrysostom's who simply repeats the biblical

‘made’. Thrall’s general argument seeking a relational understanding in which sin and righteousness balance is appealing, but how did Christ come to stand in this relation with God? What is the role of God? What does it mean that he ‘made’ Christ to be sin?

Ralph Martin suggests that we would expect something less stark here, ‘offered’ or ‘gave’ for example, but ‘ἐποίησεν’ comes from the pre-Pauline traditional material that is being reworked here if not actually quoted.¹⁹ Not only is the nature of any pre-Pauline material contested, it only serves to push the authorship back one stage. Paul willingly includes the phrase that God made Christ to be sin.

The flow of the verse suggests that the making sin happens to the one who at that point knew no sin. Some have argued that the sinlessness of Christ refers to his pre-existence with God,²⁰ and so the ‘making to be sin’ can be a general reference to the incarnation. The majority opinion, though, is that Christ’s sinlessness refers to his human life, in which case the ‘making to be sin’ must refer to the passion.²¹ In the passion God made Jesus share our sinful state of estrangement. Jesus’ cry of forsakenness offers powerful testimony to that fact. But how did God make Jesus share our state of being? Is there any sense of compulsion? Is God engineering events so it happens? Or should we take the active ‘ἐποίησεν’ as a dramatic and forceful expression for a more passive action on God’s part: God allows or God gives up?

This takes us to our third passage, in which we return again to Gospel language, for in Romans 8:32, Paul uses the word ‘παραδίδωμι’. In the Gospels it is used with a variety of meanings. It can have a more neutral meaning, ‘to give’, so a master gives over his possessions to his servants,²² and it can have a positive meaning, ‘to hand down’, so Jesus speaks what he has been ‘given’ by God,²³ and Luke asserts that written accounts of the life of Jesus have been ‘handed down’ by eye-witnesses.²⁴ But with reference to Jesus it appears to have an almost exclusively negative meaning of ‘to hand over’.

Paul also uses this verb in a variety of contexts. Positively, the familiar Pauline institution of the Lord’s supper begins with Paul reminding the Corinthians that he ‘handed down’ to them what he himself had received.²⁵ Negatively, God ‘hands over’ sinful people to their desires²⁶ and Paul ‘hands over’ individuals to Satan.²⁷ Five times in the Pauline letters the verb refers to Jesus. In Romans 4:25 Paul develops a theme we have seen in the narratives of the Gospels, and which, in particular finds an echo in Luke: Je-

sus was given up on account of our sins and raised on account of our righteousness. The verb is in the passive mood, without any subject, in a similar pattern to Acts 2:23. It could be interpreted, in a similar way to those passages in Acts which contrast the human handing over to death with the divine resurrection, but is generally considered to be a divine passive, with God as the assumed subject.²⁸ This makes most sense with the phrase 'on account of our sins'. But, whoever the subject, it is another generalised description in which the 'giving up' represents the whole event of Jesus' death. In Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 5:2, 25, Jesus himself is the subject, for he willingly 'gives' himself for us. Finally, in Romans 8:32, Paul, most intriguingly, affirms that God 'gave him up' for us all. So in the Pauline letters there is a clear indication of God's involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus, but again with some degree of nuance and balance.²⁹

In addition there is an important Old Testament background. In Isaiah 53, for example, the Septuagint text chooses to use 'παράδιδωμι' three times in this chapter, in 53:6 and twice in 53:12. The clear sense in Isaiah of this suffering both being within the plan of God and having soteriological effect deepen and colour the New Testament usage. Secondly, there is a linguistic parallel in Romans 8:32, in the call of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:16. Abraham is commended by God for not sparing his beloved son, but being willing to sacrifice him. God, Paul insists in a loud echo, did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all. It is possible, as Dunn points out, that Paul simply takes a familiar phrase and reuses it for his own purpose; on the other hand, it may be used in Romans 8:32 with a clearer theological intent. Dunn suggests that Paul's innovation is to change the reference from contemporary Jews who viewed the faithfulness of Abraham for which he is commended as a pattern for their behaviour, to God's faithfulness, for which Abraham's action is an anti-type.³⁰ But the binding of Isaac has its own difficulties in relation to violence, for the conclusion may be drawn that God goes further than Abraham, to the most extreme, for while Isaac was saved, God kills his own Son.³¹ Thus Romans 8:32 and the use of 'παράδιδωμι' has given rise to quite different interpretations.

W H Vanstone, for example, considers that 'handing over' is the description of the whole passion in the Gospels par excellence.³² It is, he claims one of the most consistent terms used by all four gospel writers in quite different contexts. It is used thirty one times to describe the action of Judas, even on occasions when it seems inappropriate,³³ but also to describe the handing

over of Jesus by the Jewish authorities to Pilate³⁴ and by Pilate back to the Jewish authorities³⁵ or to the soldiers for crucifixion.³⁶ But Vanstone considers that 'παράδωμι' is in itself 'ambivalent, neutral and colourless',³⁷ acquiring a positive or negative meaning depending on its context, supporting his argument by pointing out that the technical negative term for betrayal, 'προδίδωμι' is used only once of Judas.³⁸ This is the great value for the gospel writers of the word 'παράδωμι', for it describes not one particular incident, but the whole of the event; it is a word to describe passion in its strictest meaning, for it marks the transition, so Vanstone argues, from Jesus' active work to his passive state of being, which is of great significance. Vanstone then goes on to argue for an understanding of God which has passion at its core.³⁹

Wiard Popkes offers a more detailed analysis of the New Testament use of 'παράδωμι' in his doctoral thesis, but places a greater stress on its negative meaning. Popkes considers this one of the most unheard of statements in the New Testament, and, not wanting to water down the verb, suggests that 'one might say, in the words of the dogma of the early Church: the first person of the Trinity casts out and annihilates the second.'⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, drawing heavily on Popkes, picks up this terminology in *'The Crucified God'*, and reflects on the involvement of God in the cross that such language implies. Moltmann suggests that Romans 8:32 presents a contrasting understanding to its negative use in the Gospels, for 'whereas there it means 'deliver over', 'betray', 'abandon', here it is used by Paul as an expression of the love and election of God.'⁴¹ But later on in the same book Moltmann picks up Popkes' language again, even more clearly, and connects the deliverance and liberation of godforsaken humankind with the delivering up of the godforsaken, crucified Jesus. So, Moltmann suggests, according to Romans 8:32, 'God gave up his own Son, abandoned him, cast him out and delivered him up to an accursed death... Thus in the total, inextricable abandonment of Jesus by his God and Father, Paul sees the delivering up of the Son by the Father for godless and godforsaken man.'⁴²

In an exegesis of this verb, Moltmann clarifies his understanding of the role of God in the death of Jesus. Although it is the initiative of grace rather than betrayal, God casts out, delivers up, abandons Jesus to death on a cross. There is, therefore, a strong resonance between the human and divine handing over of Jesus. The silence in Gethsemane speaks of the God who abandons the Son, who is not willing to take away the cup – in fact who has filled

the cup to the brim. Moltmann uses language that strongly suggests that not only does God act in the cross of Jesus, but acts violently.

It is for this reason that Dorothee Sölle launches a critical tirade against Moltmann, accusing him of portraying a violent and sadistic God, for it is the Father who causes the suffering of the Son.⁴³ Although Sölle's criticisms are overstated and her own writing is highly polemical, her basic point is valid. Moltmann's language in *The Crucified God* suggests that God is also the author of suffering as well as the one who endures it. Although this may not be Moltmann's intention, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion. There then follows a fascinating dialogue between Moltmann and Sölle, as Moltmann attempts to defend himself against Sölle's criticisms, both by passing the blame back to Popkes and subtly rewriting sections of *The Crucified God*. In these sections that reappear in *The Way of Jesus Christ*,⁴⁴ Moltmann eloquently rejects any thought or language suggesting that God is in any way violent. However, in more recent work he is not consistent in this respect, and he leaves himself open to Sölle's original criticisms. At times he speaks of the action of the Father on the Son, so that Jesus experiences 'suffering from God' and 'the hidden, absent, even rejecting Father'.⁴⁵ On other occasions there are masochistic overtones in his writing, so 'God is acting in his own Son and in so far in himself'⁴⁶ and 'here the Father acted on himself'.⁴⁷

Returning to our text, A E Harvey concludes that 'to anyone familiar with the Scriptures in Greek, it would readily suggest that the real initiator of this handing over was God himself, and that it took place not just as part of the judicial process, but on a wider stage of human destiny'.⁴⁸ But how are we to understand this 'handing over' or giving up' of God? Does it necessarily carry with it violent connotations? Vanstone certainly thinks not. Drawing on those occasions when 'παράδωμι' is used of the self-giving of Jesus rather than the 'handing over' of Judas, Vanstone sees this giving up as a letting go by God.

'These phrases do not imply that the death of Jesus was willed by himself or by the Father. They imply that what was so willed was his passion, his unconditional exposure... to whatever the hands of men should do to him.'⁴⁹

Contemporary Implications

We have seen that there is a cluster of New Testament verses and concepts around the involvement of God in the cross of Jesus. In Luke God 'gives up', 'wills' and 'fulfils'; in Paul God presents as a 'sacrifice', 'makes to be sin' and 'gives up'. What is striking about all these occasions is that they offer no clear understanding of the role of God in the violent death of Jesus. A number of them offer very general descriptions; in others the meaning is very difficult to pin down. There is a sense that they are struggling after understanding how this very human event was also divine, but are convinced of the involvement of God in the cross. We too have been struggling with these texts, trying to tease out their meaning. At this point we must honestly admit that it is necessary to place these specific texts within a wider theological understanding to help grasp their meaning.

One way of understanding this would be by drawing on the Hebrew tendency to describe God, who is the ultimate cause of events, for God is the creator of the world, as the direct cause of particular events. Such vivid and immediate language needs some interpretation. The human and divine activity in the cross could therefore be understood by distinguishing between the immediate action of human beings and the ultimate action of God who stands behind all events in history. While this suggestion may be helpful in explaining the directness and vividness of some language, it also runs the risk of removing the particular involvement of God in the cross. The New Testament stresses that in a unique way the cross was a divine event. We saw, for example, that part of Luke's aim was to stress that the cross is not a chance event to which God then responded, but part of the purpose of God, and that for Paul the cross is crucially an event which is of salvic significance. We need another way of accounting for the activity of God and human beings in this one event, which gives both their due significance. Two concepts would seem to be important.

First, the cross reveals God as vulnerable. God's ultimate action, as Vanstone eloquently suggests, is to allow God's-self to be passive. God is deeply involved in the passion and death of Jesus, for he allows Jesus to be in the hands of human beings, not by chance but by God's action. Now such references to God and Jesus, Christian theology has always insisted, must be interpreted with reference to the trinity, to the Father, Son and Spirit. The

silence of Gethsemane, the 'handing over' of the Son and the whole purpose of God can only be properly understood within a trinitarian context. For God to give up the Son is for God to give God's self. Similarly, that Jesus gives himself for us is as much an act of God, as the giving up of the Son by the Father. It is in a trinitarian context that the description of the giving up of the Son as a letting go, takes on its deepest meaning, for it is a description of mutuality. The Father lets go of the Son in giving him up, and the Son lets go of the Father in giving himself, as Father, Son and Spirit act out of vulnerable love. Such a trinitarian understanding affirms the Lucan stress on the plan of God and the Pauline emphasis on handing over. The God, for whom creation was an act of self giving, had from eternity planned to give God's self to creation in the Son, knowing that there was the greatest risk that creation would respond by rejecting God's gift. It is not that God had planned in detail what each individual would do, as if they had no choice, but that to send Jesus to walk the way of love would mean to walk the way of the cross. For such a trinitarian God to act violently in the death of Jesus would be masochistic, for it would mean God acting violently against God's self.

As is often the case, hymnody both expresses and inculcates a theology of the cross. Stuart Townend's modern hymn, 'How deep the Father's love for us', for example, contains the lines:

'How great the pain of searing loss,
the Father turns his face away.'⁵⁰

This seems to be a modern poetic expression of the same point that Moltmann sought to make. Townend is right, I think, to stress the reality of the experience of the cross for God. The sin of the world which the Son bears reaches right into the heart of God. But equally, it seems to me, is wrong in separating out the Father from the Son, in such a way that the Father acts in an emotionally violent way. To suggest, in reply, that the Father cannot look upon sin and so must turn away, begs the question who it is who endures sin on the cross and what relationship has God had with the sinful world for so long. Personally I would always want to change these lines to read:

How great the pain of searing loss,
the Father waits in agony,

Here, the pain of the cross does indeed reach into the very heart of God, to the point that there is indeed a real brokenness in God, but in such a way that

does justice to our trinitarian understanding of God. In the silence of the cross, The Father looks and longs for the Son, while the Son cries out for the Father and the Spirit waits in anticipation.

I have suggested that the concept of 'giving up' may stand behind the New Testament texts we have considered, not just in those that use this explicit language, but in all the descriptions of God's involvement in the death of Jesus. So Luke informs us that Jesus was given up, that God fulfilled what God had promised, and that God's preordained will was worked out in the actions of human beings. God fulfilled all that was promised by giving God's-self in an act of vulnerability not an act of rejection. God's will was always to come in Jesus into the theatre of human sin, knowing that love would provoke death. And so Paul emphasises how God makes Jesus to be sin and gives him up for us all. It would seem quite possible to understand this cluster of verses within the language they suggest, that of giving up. It is at this point that Moltmann, for example, struggles most. His desire to stress God's action – it is God who acts on God – leaves little room for God's action to become passion.⁵¹ Yet when the action of God leads to this very passion, then both God and human beings have roles within the drama that are real and distinct and significance. The violent death of Jesus is a genuinely divine and genuinely human drama. Vanstone suggests that

'one might say that the ultimate glory of God's creativity is the creation of his own exposure to that which he has created: that of all that God has done in and for the world, the most glorious things is this – that he has handed himself over to the world.'⁵²

Secondly, the cross reveals God as the one who overcomes violence. It is important not to interpret the texts in such a way that God is written out of the drama. Equally it is vital that violence of the death of Jesus stands, neither heightened to become the worst of human pain, which seems to be a significant theological undercurrent in *The Passion of the Christ*, or down played to become insignificant. Jesus' death is a violent one, but in it God acts to overcome violence. This is in sharp contrast to those theories of the Atonement which have understood the cross to be the venting of the Father's anger on the Son as our substitute and the procuring of reconciliation through a violent act of God. There may be an argument in general terms for a proper differentiation in violent acts so that 'good' or beneficial violence is distinguished from 'bad' or harmful violence. But in the case of Jesus' death, al-

though good clearly emerges from a violent event, the violence involved can not be termed as good. If the resurrection of Jesus both protests against the violence and death of the cross and recreates that which has been broken, then there is no place for a violent act of God to achieve it. Despite the thinking of many western political leaders, the destination of peace cannot be separated from the path that leads to this end. It is here that the Lucan rhetoric comes into its own. The response of God to the violent death of Jesus is not vengeance – the earth is not flooded so that the sinful are destroyed – but resurrection, which restores rather than destroys.

One concept that is fundamental to the theology of both Moltmann and Sölle, although developed with different emphases, is that of solidarity.⁵³ On the cross God stands in solidarity with us, enduring the violence and suffering of the world, and from this basis offers hope to both ‘the godless and godforsaken’⁵⁴, that is both those who perpetrate violence and those who endure the violent acts of others. This notion of solidarity helps to remove any vestige of the ‘Greek gods’ in our understanding of atonement. The cross is not the act of a vengeful God, whose wrath needs to be propitiated. Nor is there any mechanistic understanding of atonement, in which the scales of sin and righteousness somehow must balance. And neither, in the resurrection, does God act ‘from above’ as a *deus ex machina* who appears at the end of the drama to put things right.

In Jesus God endures the suffering that arises from the sin of others, as a victim of torture and oppression among other victims. And this is the essential universalising element within the cross that connects that one event to the whole of history. The biblical declaration, often repeated in the eucharistic liturgy of the church, is that Jesus was the Lamb of God who bore the sins of the world. On the cross Jesus hung in solidarity not just with the two criminals whose literal fate he shared, but with all through the whole of history. In Jesus, God so plumbed the depths of sin and suffering that there is real solidarity with all who live in a violent world.

On this basis of solidarity, Luke and Paul both offer us insights into how the cross can be atoning for us. But both do so on the basis that atonement is essentially relational. Atonement is less to do with the making good of sins and much more with the justification and resurrection of sinners. Luke emphasises the forgiveness of Jesus, supremely illustrated by the words of pardon offered from the cross. Atonement is the free act of God from within the sin and suffering, offering us forgiveness. In solidarity with sinful humanity,

God bears the consequences of human sin, and so God's offer of forgiveness is no magic touch, but comes with the full integrity of one who is deeply involved in this violent world. On the basis of solidarity God is the one who alone can forgive.⁵⁵

But arising from solidarity comes resurrection, not, as we have said, from the God who is beyond, but from the God deeply involved within the world. Earlier we considered Paul's use of *παράδωμι* in Romans 8:32, a verse that incorporates his notion of solidarity. Paul then brings this argument to a poetic climax by insisting that nothing will separate us from the risen Christ, establishing a new solidarity in which we share in the resurrection of Jesus. In resurrection a new relationship between Father and Son is created, and with Christ as our representative it is a relationship in which we can share. The God of the cross is the one who endures the violence to the point of the death of the Son, so that in the resurrection the cycle of violence can be broken. It is only the trinitarian God who endures and overcomes violence who offers hope to a violent world.

Where was God in the violent death of Jesus? The answer could be given by Vanstone in his well-known reflection on the disaster in Aberfan, when the slag heap slipped on the village school. 'Our preaching on the Sunday after the tragedy was not of a God who, from the top of the mountain, caused or permitted for his own inscrutable reasons, its destruction and descent, but one who received at the foot of the mountain all its appalling impact, and who in the extremity of endeavour will find yet new resource to restore and redeem.'⁵⁶ And such an answer is in accord with Luke and Paul, for it was always in the purpose of God to give God's self in God's Son and to be at the bottom of the mountain.

What can we say about the silence in the garden? Did God answer Jesus' impassioned cry? Yes, God answered and God acted, by waiting. God's action was to give God's-self into the hands of human beings. God is not absent in the silence, but God waits.

And what can we say about banging nails into a piece of wood or *The Passion of the Christ*? Certainly they graphically portrays the violence involved in the cross. It was a violent event, which we must not downplay, but violence is not its heart. Surely we need something that faces us not with violence, per se, but vulnerability.

Notes

¹ Luke 22:42.

² Acts 2:23, 2:36, 3:13-15, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39-40, 13:27-30.

³ Acts 2:23, 2:36, 3:13-15, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39, 13:29.

⁴ John T Squires, 'The Plan of God' in, I Howard Marshall and David Peterson (eds.) *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 21-3. See also John T Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, SNTSMS 76 (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

⁵ Acts 14:21.

⁶ Cosgrove, 'The divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts', *NovT* 26 (1984), p. 184.

⁷ Luke 7:30.

⁸ Mark 10:45.

⁹ C H Cosgrove, 'The divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts', p. 179.

¹⁰ Cosgrove, 'The divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts', p. 174.

¹¹ J D G Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1988), p. 170.

¹² C H Cranfield, *Romans (International Critical Commentary)*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, pp. 216-7.

¹³ Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 217.

¹⁴ C K Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans (Black New Testament Commentaries)*, London A&C Black, 1962, p. 1978.

¹⁵ Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians (Anchor Bible Commentary)*, p. 340.

¹⁶ Margaret Thrall, *2 Corinthians (International Critical Commentary)*, pp. 440-1.

¹⁷ Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, p. 442, quoting C K Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, London: A&C Black, 1973, p. 180.

¹⁸ Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, p. 441, referring back to Chrysostom, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers XII*, p. 334.

¹⁹ Ralph P Martin, *2 Corinthians (Word Biblical Commentary)*, pp. 156-7.

²⁰ See H Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief*, MeyerK 6, Göttingen, 1907, pp. 197-8.

²¹ For example, Victor Furnish *2 Corinthians*, p. 339; Margaret Thrall, *2 Corinthians*, p. 439.

²² Matthew 25:14.

²³ Luke 10:22.

²⁴ Luke 1:2.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23.

²⁶ Romans 1:24, 26, 28.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20.

²⁸ See, for example, J D G Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 224.

²⁹ Dunn offers the suggestion, *Romans 1-8*, pp. 500-1, that Romans 8:32, bringing to a climax the first part of the epistle, deliberately counterbalances the first chapter. There, Romans 1:24, 26, 28, Paul asserts three times that God, in wrath, 'hands over' those who are sinful to their own desires. Whereas here in Romans 8:32 God in grace hands over his Son for us all. This interpretation would clearly suggest that God is the implied author of the verb in Romans 4:25, in the very midst of the argument, both handing over and raising up.

³⁰ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p. 501.

³¹ Thus Dorothee Sölle writes, *Suffering*, (Philadelphia: Fortress / London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), p. 27, 'The story of Abraham didn't reach the height of brutality; it was the Father of Jesus Christ who first acted intentionally, 'deliberately' slaying his son.'

³² For what follows see W H Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, pp. 1-13.

³³ For example, Matthew 27:4: 'I have handed over innocent blood'; See Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, p. 9.

³⁴ Matthew 27:2; Mark 15:1.

³⁵ Luke 23: 25; John 19:16.

³⁶ Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15.

³⁷ Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, p. 7.

³⁸ Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, p. 5.

³⁹ Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, pp 17-33.

⁴⁰ Wiard Popkes, *Christus Traditus: Eine Untersuchung zum Begriff der Dahingabe im Neuen Testament*, (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1967), p. 286.

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, London: SCM, 1974, p. 191.

⁴² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 242.

⁴³ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, pp. 27-8.

- ⁴⁴ See Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, (London: SCM, 1990), pp. 172-7.
- ⁴⁵ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, (London: SCM, 1992), pp. 64-5.
- ⁴⁶ Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, (London: SCM, 1979), p. 65.
- ⁴⁷ Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, p. 67.
- ⁴⁸ Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, p. 23.
- ⁴⁹ Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, pp. 78-9.
- ⁵⁰ Stuart Townend, 'How deep the Father's love for us'.
- ⁵¹ See my discussion in *A Cry in the Darkness: The Forsakenness of Jesus in Scripture, Theology and Experience*, (Oxford/ Macon, Georgia: Regent's Park College / Smith and Helwys, 2002), pp. 80-3, 90-1.
- ⁵² Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, pp. 94-5.
- ⁵³ For a fuller discussion see *A Cry in the Darkness*, pp. 228-34.
- ⁵⁴ See Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, (London: SCM, 1992) p.128.
- ⁵⁵ This idea was explored further in another, unpublished, paper written for the group by Tim Carter.
- ⁵⁶ W H Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, (London: DLT, 1977) p. 65

Violence and Worship: Redeeming the Language of God

Hazel Sherman

Introduction

Although it is really too obvious to warrant stating, it does no harm to remind ourselves that not all violence is of the same order. There are aspects of violence which have to do with the creation of life: the violence inherent to life and growth, the child being pushed from the womb, the seed bursting its way out of the tomb (often used as an image of the violence of resurrection), the grasses pushing their way up through the urban concrete. There is violence that may be categorised as malevolently purposed, or emerging with destructive effect - the violence of frustration, the violence that causes one to fling the offending object away in desperation, the violence that is born of fear, or exhaustion, or the never-ending repetitiveness of degenerative mental disease.

Other forms of violence may be the result of a quest for revenge. They may be a result of helplessness and frustration or fundamental insecurity. They may result from deprivation or disturbance in personality. Violence may be expressed in aggression against the other, or in self-mutilation or harm. It may be evidenced in individuals or corporately through nations or structures.

Such violence is what we might describe as 'death dealing' (whether or not it leads to the victim being killed). Theologically, this is the violence that we link with evil, whether the damage is to life and limb or life and mind, whether it is torture, bullying, domestic violence, or child abuse.

When we read the violent stories of Scripture, and take up the violent language of sacrifice, we are engaging with unspoken questions of how we dis-

tinguish between these things. When we participate in Christian worship through the Eucharist we are not only participating in the deep presence of Christ but also humanly living in a maelstrom of conflict, made greater in our generation by the loss of a particular and generally unquestioning religious framework (not necessarily a bad thing) and the loss of innocence with regard to religious language (in fact with regard to any language, a feature of life which is sometimes scornfully dismissed as 'political correctness' but actually runs far deeper than that).

It may be said that the death of Jesus comes into both these categories in some way: as the birth pangs of the new age, and as the one who suffers the full force of the factors that deal in death. If the death of Jesus in any way comes into the category of 'necessary violence', how can this be expressed today so as to counter the violence of 'this present age' when 'war on terror' pits violence against violence? And how is this expressed in our worship?

Christian language in worship often does no justice to the morality of God. In hymns and songs, congregations brightly sing about how God sent his son to die. Surely I am not the only person who quietly omits or alters a verse from Sarah Betts Rhodes' simple yet profound hymn when I have the chance to print the words apart from any book –

*God who made the earth
the air, the sky, the sea,
who gave the light its birth
careth for me.*

*God who made the grass,
the flower, the fruit, the tree,
the day and night to pass,
careth for me.*

*God who made the sun,
the moon, the stars is he
who, when life's clouds come on
careth for me.*

*God who sent his son
to die on Calvary
He, if I lean on him
will care for me.*

Printed in larger font for Residential Care Homes and Day Hospital services, I usually omit the last verse. Am I adopting too patronising an attitude to people's grasp of subtle and complex truth – or seeking integrity in language and understanding? The attempt to re-phrase leads to unconsidered difficulties, leading into the limerick of forced rhyme –

*God whose son for me
was killed on Calvary...*

And so we try

*God who sent his son
who died on Calvary....*

But here there is no seed of creative connection between God and the death of Jesus and me, other than 'happenstance' – God sent his son who just happened to die. So the way of choice is to omit the verse and choose not to sing it! But there are so many hymns and songs that thus become 'un-used' because of one line or phrase.¹

Nineteenth Century hymns seem to be enjoying something of a revival in some evangelical churches. Along with such prolific twentieth/twenty first century writers as Graham Kendrick, they often focus on the sacrifice of Christ. And the sacrifice of Christ is a central stem in the gospel. So why does it seem to me that there something so dreadfully wrong sometimes in our singing of it? It may be, of course, that I have never really responded to the call of Christ or really been saved. That was suggested once, when confessing my problems with some hymns and songs.

The problem, though, is one of reasonable consequences about the nature of God. How can any God who 'sent his son to die' be morally good? The notion of a God who deliberately predetermines the death of a son sabotages the whole enterprise of receiving salvation from such a God, as it causes us to ask, 'Do we want to be saved by such a one as would knowingly send his own son to the greatest suffering?' And what confidence can we have in such a God as would *unknowingly* do such a thing? Even knowledge of resurrection to come (supposing a certain sort of omnipotence) does not let God off the hook, if this God is called Father. In our singing it is very hard to avoid the strong implication that 'he sent his son with the intent that he *should* die'. And how can a morally corrupt God save the world?

Of course we know that this is not the God to whom Scripture bears witness. Although we gain too much of the wrong sort of baggage if we sing 'God who sent his son to die...', we have to keep the aspects 'to die' and 'for

me/us' together. God has acted 'on our account'. We are the direct recipients of costly giving.

Other hymns also use the imagery of martyrs and martyrdom. But how can the language of martyrdom, of bloody sacrifice, be used with meaning and truth for a generation which has seen suicide bombers, intent on martyrdom, flying their hi-jacked human cargo into the twin towers? Even the powerful prayer for light and understanding in the more modern hymn by Frances Wheeler Davis, 'Let there be light',² becomes difficult to sing, in a climate where the language of martyr is used most popularly in the context of terrorist attack –

*Hallow our love
hallow the deaths of martyrs
hallow their holy freedom,
hallowed be your name*

In conversation with members of the church in which I serve, one opinion is that I'm making a fuss about nothing. "Why can't you just be a bit more laid-back about it? We know that here we are singing about 'Christian martyrs'!" But I am still left wondering – how is the interface between our language and our world forming us? Is it enabling the connections we make, or dulling them? I am mindful, of course, that not only hymns, but the classic testimony in Scripture to God's relationship established with the world through Christ, speaks about a covenant sealed by blood.³ This paper is not an attempt to provide an alternative to Christian wisdom other than the gospel. Rather, the aim is to do some ground clearing concerning the nature of violence, some contemporary theological response and its implications for our worship.

Exploration

A fire was started in the Refuge. Women who were seeking some respite from abusive relationships, and for whom fear and experience of violence is a fact of life, found themselves fearful again for themselves and their children's safety. When the emergency services and workers arrived, one child in particular appeared to be hugely enjoying the drama. He knew how it had begun, with the pages torn from books in the playroom piled up and lit at the

foot of the long curtains, so that the blaze had caught and spread. "It was the ginger cat" he said, bizarrely blaming the events of a frightening night on the animal who "wanted to kill my mum". His younger brother, at five years old, was heard wishing another child dead.

Both boys had been left with an abusive father and then reclaimed by a mother whose own complex needs and personal history had conspired to make her deceitful and manipulative. To those making the difficult decisions about eviction, and recognising their helplessness in the face of children damaged beyond the capacity of their skills and resources to make a difference, the questions about cycles of violence were far from academic. For the safety of the others, they had to be moved, but it would only be a matter of time before more violent behaviour ensued.

The whole episode had been 'death dealing'. To those resident in the refuge it brought not only threat to safety and life, but also stirred up a turmoil of emotions with respect to someone among them who was placing them all at risk, and made them fearful to disclose information which would expose her. Workers committed to helping women fleeing domestic abuse in order to build new lives would now suffer the threat of bad publicity and slander about their lack of concern and competence from one they had done all in their power to support. The 'fire raising' children would be moved again into different centres for 'care' and their mother would find 'proof' again that the world is stacked against her.

Perhaps, in it all, the older child spoke more truly than he knew. The ginger cat, an innocent participant in the life of the community, may, in an earlier more primitive age, have provided the necessary victim for a sacrifice, breaking the cycle of violence and destruction.⁴

As a way of interpreting this story, we turn to the work of René Girard, particularly in his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.⁵ Historian, anthropologist, theological thinker, literary critic, are just some of designations for Girard. For around thirty years he has been developing a theological anthropology which is increasingly providing a creative hermeneutic for those engaged in biblical exposition and preaching in the context of today's violent world.⁶ Paul Tournier, in the 1970's, was engaging with aspects of Girard's thinking,⁷ which now in its fuller development is being grasped in a more systematic way by a new generation of Christian preachers and teachers. Girard has reminded us of the place and significance of violence and sacrifice

within the ancient world, and extrapolated the implications of that for the meaning and significance of the death of Christ. In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* he re-explores the connections between mythology and the Gospels.

To summarise something of Girard's anthropology: the capacity for imitation and desire is our deepest human characteristic. This is what he propounds as 'mimetic desire'. In a non-pejorative sense, an infant grows and develops through desire for what its parents provide and through imitation. A 'third person' will always be the model for our desire. It matters little whether we desire goods, or a certain sort of prosperity or personality or attitude; without 'the person who gives value to the objects' there would be no desire. By implication, if there were no such model there would be neither desire nor humanity. But to desire what others also desire leads to conflict, and with conflict and competition, violence is the inevitable result.

When things go wrong in community to the point of violence, it is from a 'double idolatry of self and other'.⁸ Adoration of neighbour is not distinguished from adoration of ourselves: we also are the idol, seeking the accoutrements and adoration owned by our neighbour and violence results. The Decalogue addresses this by first forbidding violent acts before returning to the desire that inspires such violence.⁹

After violence, there is an impulse to blame, and people seek an object of opprobrium. A victim is identified: the victim is killed. The killer's faults are imposed on and absorbed by the victim who (thereby demonised) carries them to the grave. The victim thus becomes saviour of the community, which is saved to 'live another day' as the victim is then divinised as salvific figure:

'By the end of these myths unanimous violence has reconciled the community and the reconciling power is attributed to the victim, who is already 'guilty', already 'responsible' for the crisis. The victim is thus transfigured twice, the first time in a negative, evil fashion; the second time in a positive, beneficial fashion. Everyone thought this victim had perished, but it turns out he or she must be alive since this very one reconstructs the community immediately after destroying it. He or she is clearly immortal and thus divine. So the conclusion must be that the myths themselves reflect, though in a confused and altered fashion, the process that the Gospels enable us to see and that we found subsequently in the Ephesus stoning.'¹⁰

The stoning mentioned is that recorded by Philostratus in the Second Century *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, in which an innocent beggar is killed by Apollonius' engineering of an, at first, reluctant and then mass-hysterical crowd. The beggar is perceived through progressive lenses from innocent to suspect to charlatan to demon, and ultimately becomes the 'plague demon'. His destruction is for the good of the city. Since the inadequacies of this justification for violence are clearly apparent, the story provides not only a telling illustration of the tragic limitations of living by this sort of myth but also a pointer to how easy it is for the divine-human engagement in the Hebrew and Christian stories to slide in the telling into a more pagan mythology.

Biblical and mythical drama (in which Girard includes the Passion of Christ) both represent 'the same type of collective violence against a single victim'¹¹, but a breakthrough in the Bible comes where victims are perceived as innocent rather than guilty (even if that guilt, like that of Oedipus, was unwitting). Girard's conclusions in part rest on recognising and accepting the commonality of diagnosis of the human condition in pagan mythology and in the Bible but going beyond simply tabulating comparisons to acknowledging the fundamental disjunction in their given 'cure'.¹²

Biblical insight is defined by its most significant moments. Amongst these are the developments in which God's bias towards the victim is made clear, for example through the laments and praises of the Psalms, and divine initiative on behalf of the oppressed. That is not to say that the characters of the stories are those who are necessarily innocent of any wrong in every way. God comes to the aid of Joseph and of Moses, for example, and their stories are not without ambiguity. But the movement towards 'innocent victim' is most clearly marked in the depiction of the suffering servant in Second Isaiah (whose specific context and identity are tantalisingly elusive) and found completed in Christ the supremely innocent one.

There is a sense that, although sometimes perceived as a direct threat to a Christian reading of the Gospels by those who fear relativism, the recognition of common ground with mythology enables the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel to sound more clearly, because the power of myth is itself acknowledged whilst the Christian story is seen to go beyond this. One most important respect is the way in which the resurrection of Christ initiates and enables the voice of dissent. There is no necessary connection between victimhood and fault, and those who joined in the process of blame and sacrifice are able to repent of their own part in it and turn completely to serve and free

other victims. Another is the attribution of 'true representation' to Christian revelation. In mythology, the victim-turned-benefactor, accorded eternal or divine status, remains permeated with the faults that caused his death in the first place, and there continues a repetitive pattern without final resolution. The 'circularity of mimetic conflict and contagion'¹³ continues.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, however, 'the victim never rises again: God is never victimised, not is the victim divinised'.¹⁴ The 'scapegoat process' that produces the gods in primitive mythology is simply not there in the Hebrew texts. A comparison of the story of Joseph with the Oedipus myth reveals shared aspects of the mimetic cycle – crisis, followed by collective violence – but then a parting of the ways. In the first place, a family crisis occurs during the youth of the heroes, which results in their expulsion. One is prompted by divine oracle and the other by tangible jealousy, but with the same result. Both stories indicate a second crisis, though with differing results. Oedipus, King of Thebes after saving the city, returns unwittingly to kill his father and marry his mother, thus leading to a second exclusion. Joseph rises to power in Egypt (by not dissimilar wit and skill to Oedipus) and is imprisoned as a result of the process of desire from Potiphar's wife. Oedipus, despite his unknowing guilt, is guilty. Joseph, knowing his circumstances, is quite deliberately innocent.

The fundamental difference is that the Hebrew tale never gives any ground for the justification of collective violence. In the myth, however much the teller of the tale might abhor its result, the hero cannot be exonerated, even if he *has* acted 'in all innocence' (as we might say). He is, in the most important respect, guilty. He *has* done what he is accused of. For Joseph there is no hint of this – 'the real cause of the expulsion is mimetic rivalry'.¹⁵ Moreover, at the denouement of the Biblical story, Joseph is neither demonised, nor divinised, but 'humanised'.¹⁶

Whilst the story of Joseph has a 'happy ending' as does the story of Job (another significant marker for Girard), each reveals a point at which pardon (or in Job's case 'intercession') replaces the inevitable next cycle of violence. The Hebrew Scriptures perceive injustice and critique the inevitability of 'sacralised' violence. Joseph's expulsion is *not* inevitable, and Job's aggressive refusal to let go his integrity is justified. The Biblical world is not thereby a falsely optimistic one, and does not understate the power of evil.¹⁷ 'Mimetic contagion' enthralls: but there is a difference of interpretation – the 'mimetic war of all against one' is not acceptable.

More sharply, Girard considers the 'victims' who shout loud and clear in the Psalms. We do not 'like' the violence of their language, and many of us have absorbed this as a problem and a weakness in the Hebrew scriptures. But such sensibilities (caused by what Girard scathingly calls 'the Puritans of language') cause us to miss the most important point –

'They give no attention to the only violence worthy of being taken seriously, the violence about which the narrators complain. They suspect nothing of the extraordinary originality of the psalms ... *to let the voice of the victims, rather than that of their persecutors, be heard.*'¹⁸

So whatever is happening when we move to the gospels, and find the 'third aspect' of the mimetic cycle well and truly back in place – the divinity of the victim? At one level, it would seem that Jesus who is betrayed, tried and killed by will of the crowd and their leaders who cannot control their desires and jealousies, is the archetype of the victim who absorbs evil and is first demonised (outside the camp) and then divinised (raised from death to God's right hand). Some would say that the continuing representation of this in Communion, Eucharist or Mass is nothing more than a sanitised version of the dying and rising myths of the pagans – a continuing necessity in the cycle of violent contagion and scapegoating. Girard says, 'by no means' – this whole cycle is actually *subverted* by the resurrection, which 'owes nothing to human violence'.

I began with the problem of God's perceived action in the process of the death of Christ. This is a particular problem in talk about 'God sending Jesus to die' and in the implications of the outlook which has been characterised as 'penal substitutionary theory' with regard to the work of Christ. It is a theory which has a strong holding power in many congregations. The exchange mechanism is one which relies rather heavily on a more pagan outlook than its proponents would wish to acknowledge. Girard may help us to recognise that there is no need for God to be involved in this way at all:

'From the anthropological aspect the Cross is the moment when a thousand mimetic conflicts, a thousand scandals¹⁹ that crash violently into one another during the crisis, converge against Jesus alone.....

... Is it necessary to refuse this mimetic anthropology in the name of a given theology? Is it necessary to see in the gathering against Jesus the work of God the Father, who like the divinities of the *Iliad* would move

humankind to act against his Son in order to exact from him the ransom that they themselves could not provide? To me this interpretation appears contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the Gospels.

There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that God causes the mob to come together against Jesus. Violent contagion is enough. Those responsible for the Passion are the human participants themselves, incapable of resisting the violent contagion that affects them all when a mimetic snowballing comes within their range, or rather when they come within the range of this snowballing and are swept along by it. We don't have to invoke the supernatural to explicate this. The war of *all against all* that transforms communities into a war of *all against one* that gathers and unifies them is not limited solely to the case of Jesus.²⁰

But how does 'violent contagion' as the *cause* of Jesus' death relate to the saving power of his death '*for me*'? For this is the powerful and personal transformative message of the gospel. We know that the sort of sacrifice requiring a 'necessary victim' (such as the poor cat may have become) has never 'worked'. Victims may be inevitable, but so long as we can distance ourselves from them they will ultimately be useless. Girard may help to see more clearly that as God in Christ comes among the victims, we are done out of making a victim to be abused and then eradicated. The wounded Christ is the exalted Christ who has challenged all prejudgements and expectations of victimhood by drawing together the radical disjunction between 'sacrifice' and 'freedom' to such an extent that the two are no longer mutually exclusive.

Return to worship

In worship instinctively I move away from the language of 'blood sacrifice', which the Reformers continued to use, despite their - at any rate Calvin's - stress on the Table rather than the Altar,²¹ and search for other ways of expressing the sense of God's self-giving in Christ that is found in Communion remembrance. But Jesus told his friends to remember him in eating bread and drinking wine together. And bread comes from the milling of grain and wine from the crushing of grapes. Bread is broken and wine is poured out. Com-

munion must remain in some significant way set within the context of violence. Set in the violence born of despair and let-down when another Messiah does not come up with the goods, celebrated despite the aggression of the self-seeking or terminally threatened, shared in cultures where structural weakness permits state-sanctioned murder (Pilate washes his hands of responsibility, although it has to be a Roman crucifixion). For that is exactly the world where God chooses to be enfleshed.

There is plenty of evidence of ongoing mimetic cycles. Comparison of pagan mythology with Biblical tradition may seem rather academic, but we take our cues unwittingly from one or the other. But if we, like Girard, focus on the difference in the context of the similarities, we may find creative pointers.

We betray our 21st Century enslavement to primitive mythology in the way we treat our heroes. Within our 'celebrity' culture, an extraordinarily talented footballer attracts the adulation of the crowd, the support of players, the adoration of fans. But the pedestal comes ready-cracked; the player is brought low by habits and life-style encouraged by the crowd – he is 'one of us' after all, but worse. "How have the mighty fallen!" we cry, and move on to the next victim

We betray our backwards-leaning inclination in the scapegoating of the vulnerable. An influx of people disturbs a settled community (who uncritically accept the myth of their settled-ness). Crisis, desire, competition, and violence ensue. No longer do we have to fear the threat from our neighbours, it is the 'others', the strangers, who bear the mark of the threatening ones, who are soon demonised, until the coming of a new group of immigrants, when with hindsight those who were once excluded are found to have brought great gifts.

In both examples, strands of violence and violent attitudes are to be found. This is part of the 'context of violence' in today's world. What we must say in our worship is that *this is not inevitable*. But we can't do this by weakening the impact of the violence itself. And we can't do it by obliterating or ignoring the violent texts of our tradition. Girard is quick to point to weakness in the 'modern bias of concluding too quickly that texts dealing with collective violence are violent texts whose violence we have the duty to denounce', since

'only wherever it is *not* represented can mimetic snowballing play a gen-

erative role due to the very fact that it is *not* represented, that it misunderstands itself. As soon as mimetic contagion has taken over the community, its members are possessed by it.²²

To talk about violence in an essay such as this may sound like the luxury of a theoretical conversation in the face of pictures of the grieving and bereaved in the aftermath of terrorist bombs. How can we talk, we who have not suffered in such ways? But it is precisely this point that we must learn again to recognise the importance of apparently theoretical discourse.

In the same way as resources are gathered from theological and doctrinal reflection, which, along with their living context in the worshipping, questioning, faithful and doubting community, may enable us to face the uncertainties and overturning of experience from a deeper foundation, so our theoretical questing to understand destructive violence, its roots and its radical facing-down through cross and resurrection, may help us to face the threat of terror which either paralyses or turns its victims towards ways of violence themselves. And so I will not say or sing 'God sent his son to die', but seek and seek again new ways of saying that, by the grace of God, in such dying as Christ's, there is life.

Notes

¹ Incidentally, this may point us to the interesting possibility of exploring the notion of changes to hymns as being akin to some of the differences in 'local creeds' in early church communities.

² Baptist Praise and Worship, (Oxford: OUP, 1991) No. 630.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

⁴ In the discussion following this paper my attention was drawn to a story of a ginger cat locked up in a tower (or church?) which may be the archetype for this tale. I had not been aware of this, though I later recalled T S Eliot's mysterious 'Macavity', but it brought an intriguing element into the discussion.

⁵ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001)

⁶ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univer-

sity Press 1977), *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986) and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁷ e.g. Paul Tournier *The Violence Inside* (London: SCM, 1978) pp. 90ff.

⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 11.

⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, pp. 65-66. The stoning mentioned is that recorded by Philostratus in Second Century *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, in which an innocent beggar is killed by Apollonius' initiating and manipulating the crowd in at first reluctant and then mass-hysterical stoning. The beggar is perceived through progressive lenses from innocent to suspect to charlatan to demon, as his murder is reckoned to provide unifying and healing outcome for a plague-ridden city.

¹¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 1.

¹² He also acknowledges a development in Biblical understanding, which permits him to keep vestiges of older mythical aspects in the biblical texts in the background. (He doesn't have much to say about incidents such as Uzzah touching the Ark and experiencing the retribution of sudden death, for example.)

¹³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 150.

¹⁴ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 113.

¹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 119.

¹⁷ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 115.

¹⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 116 (italics mine).

¹⁹ We should note the significance of 'scandal' – *skandalon* from the Greek (and 'stumbling block' from the Hebrew) as something that people stumble over, close in meaning to 'snare' or 'trap'. Girard's use of the term conveys a blocking of desire which has cumulative effect causing a whole group to suffer from the effects of pent-up frustration and identify, attack and destroy a victim. This is what he calls 'single victim mechanism'.

²⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, p. 23.

²¹ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVIII, § 12, '(the Lord) has therefore given us a Table at which to feast, not an altar upon which to offer a victim; he has not consecrated the priests to offer sacrifice, but ministers to distribute the sacred banquet'. Although Calvin of course is not rejecting the

concept of sacrifice but establishing that it is not a matter of literal sacrifice offered by a priest.

²² Girard, *I see Satan Fall Like Lightning* p.144

Violence and Mission: Exploring the Clash of Civilisations through Shaffer's 'The Royal Hunt of the Sun'

Graham Sparkes

Recognised as one of the foremost dramatists of the last century, Peter Shaffer has written a number of plays that have to do with the meaning of religion and the human search for God. These include *Equus* and *Amadeus*, both of which proved to be highly successful both on stage and in film, and a play first produced in 1964 entitled *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Set almost entirely in what is now South Ecuador and north-western Peru, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*¹ tells the story of the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire from June 1529 to August 1533. Shaffer based the play on the historical account of that conquest written by W H Prescott, and in his dramatic account of that story he touches on a number of issues that have to do with the relationship between mission and violence. I therefore want to use *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* as a place of dialogue in order to begin to engage with this particular theme.

A History of Violence

The stage setting for Act I is stark. It consists of a bare stage and a back wall, on which is hung a metal medallion quartered by four black crucifixes sharpened to resemble swords. Old Martin appears as the narrator. In the telling of the story we encounter him as an idealistic boy who is employed as a page to Pizarro, the Spanish Commander, and in his opening speech Old Martin recalls the dreams he had as a youngster of achieving conquest by feats of daring:

*'I used to lie up in the hayloft for hours reading my Bible - Don Cristobal on the rules of chivalry.'*²

So immediately Shaffer confronts us with the confluence of faith and violence, mission and conquest. The story of how a small band of adventurers at the height of Spanish imperialist expansion set off to invade and subdue the great Inca Empire will certainly reveal motives of greed and glory, but another reason for going is clearly a Christian missionary zeal symbolised by the presence of Valverde, the Chaplain to the expedition, and De Nizza, a Franciscan Friar. Valverde says to Young Martin

*'The blessing of God on you, my son. And on all who come with us to alter the heathen.'*³

That task of 'altering' the heathen requires the taking of soldiers, and as the adventurers prepare to leave Spain, their weapons are consecrated. Valverde, who played a prominent part in the Inquisition and had a reputation for harshness, declares

*'You are the huntsmen of God! The weapons you draw are sacred! Oh, God, invest us all with the courage of Thy unflinching Son. Show us the way to beat the savage out of his dark forests on the broad plain of Thy Grace.'*⁴

De Nizza is a more moderate and sensitive character. He prefers to speak of the expedition using a different kind of language.

*'You are the bringers of food to starving people. You go to break mercy with them like bread... Remember this always: we are their New World.'*⁵

But for him, too, evil in the form of Inca beliefs must be stamped out at all costs in order to bring about this 'New World'.

Throughout the play both the threat and the reality of violence in the cause of mission are always present, but two scenes in particular draw this to our attention. The first occurs at the end of Act I. As the soldiers who have journeyed high up into the mountains prepare to fight the Inca Indians, prayers for victory are said and Psalms for protection against evil are sung. However, as they finally come face to face the Incas voluntarily lay down all arms, and so both Valverde and De Nizza lead the way in beginning the task of converting them to Christianity through the reading of the 'Requerimento'

- a solemn statement read to indigenous inhabitants proclaiming the rights of the Pope and the king of Spain. It is when the Inca sovereign and god, Atahualpa, dares to reject this Christian faith presented to him, describing it as mad, that a verdict of guilty of blasphemy is immediately declared, and Pizarro signals that the slaughter of the now unarmed Indians should begin.

The second occurs at the end of Act II. Pizarro holds Atahualpa captive and has promised him protection. But it is clear that if he goes free, he will lead an Inca rebellion that will destroy the small band of Spanish adventurers. In these circumstances, it is Valverde who states that no promise to a pagan is binding on a Christian and that the savage must be killed to ensure the safety of the soldiers; and it is De Nizza who declares that for the sake of love, Pizarro has a duty to kill lovelessness. So Atahualpa is given a mock trial, and in order that he may be hanged instead of burned, he goes through the farce of a Christian baptism before being put to death.

Of course, the story of Christian missionary activity is not all like this! While Pizarro was destroying the Inca empire, a priest named Bartolomeo de Las Casas was dedicating his life to opposing the cruel exploitation of the Indians by Spain, petitioning the king to stop the wars of conquest. It is also true that Christians have often been the victims of violence rather than the perpetrators, enduring persecution and martyrdom for their faith. However, we cannot begin to pretend that the violent attitudes and actions of the church in Spain in the 1500s is in any way unique, for our entire history is stained by blood. There is the straightforward brutality of someone like Charlemagne who, in order to put down revolts in Saxony, declared in 785 that any Saxon unwilling to be baptised should be put to death instead! There is the use of Crusades as an instrument of evangelisation, drawing upon the concept of a holy war fought on behalf of God to justify the killing of those who stood in the way of the one true faith. And there is the story of the role of Christianity in the death of six million Jews, in the enslavement of black people, and in the oppression of women, often justified on the basis of the missionary enterprise. So often and in so many ways bloodshed has taken place in the name and for the sake of God, and in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* Shaffer deliberately draws our attention to this history and makes us face up to its reality. We are made to wonder: Does the Christian mission imperative inevitably lead to a history of violent conquest? Can mission that proclaims the 'lordship' of Christ be anything else but violent?

I have suggested our entire history is stained by blood. Perhaps that is not quite true. If there is a period in the church's history when it deliberately refused the way of violence, it is surely the earliest years of its existence. David Cunningham says that peacemaking 'was one of the aspects of the new faith that clearly distinguished it from civil religion of the Roman Empire, and from many strands of Judaism as well'⁶, and refers to the way early Christian apologists such as Justin, Tertullian and Origen spoke eloquently against Christian participation in the military. Most likely this refusal to engage in killing was due, both to the fact that the Roman army was dominated by pagan practices, and to a genuine desire to remain faithful to the non-violent witness of Jesus; certainly this commitment to pacifism made the community distinctive. It was only as Christianity ceased to be a marginal sect and gained official status following Constantine's conversion in 312CE that, in the name of responsible citizenship, violence became an acceptable part of Christian lifestyle and the spread of Roman civilisation became a means of furthering the Christian missionary calling.

The Clash of Civilisations

This raises the general question of the interplay between the missionary enterprise, the particular civilisation from within which it develops, and the tendency towards violence. It is a particularly potent question in today's world, and is certainly an issue given prominence in Shaffer's play. Shaffer confronts us with two opposing civilisations - on one side is the Christian civilisation being imported from Spain, while on the other side is the native Inca culture. And he makes us continually aware of how these two conflict and which one he would prefer to belong to!

As the adventurers come through the forest and get their first glimpse of vast terraces and fields where Indians work and sing, De Nizza cannot help saying,

*'How beautiful their tongue sounds.
...See how contented they look.'*

And Diego, one of the senior soldiers, replies,

*'It's the first time I've ever seen people glad at working.'*⁷

The Inca civilisation is portrayed as peaceful, with little sign of any greed or competition. We are told that all the people have work to do, and that all have enough food and clothes. There is beauty and dignity about the way they conduct themselves. It is a picture that provides a stark contrast to the greed and brutality that the adventurers are used to and prompts De Soto, the Second in Command, to say,

*I have settled several lands. This is the first I've entered which shames our Spain.*⁸

Pizarro replies that it is not hard to shame Spain! The only recurring criticism voiced against the Inca civilisation is that it lacks freedom, for everyone has to do what they are told, but as its communal restrictions are put alongside the greedy individualism of soldiers who end up fighting over vast quantities of Inca gold, it begins to seem like a small sacrifice to pay for a life of harmony and plenty.

The clash of these two civilisations is seen most clearly in the strange relationship between Pizarro and Atahualpa. The second half of the play explores the growing respect and affection these two 'enemies' have for one another, and it allows us to question what happens to the Christian faith when it is wedded to a particular civilisation. As the Spaniards exercise rule and Atahualpa spends his days as a prisoner in the company of Pizarro, we increasingly recognise that Pizarro is just as much a captive. His quest is for a God he can believe in - one who can answer the ultimate questions of life and death - and it is apparent that for all its missionary endeavours the church has not given him such a faith. Instead, he sees the Christian religion presented as harsh and cruel, with missionaries who preach compassion and gentleness but convert with brutal force; he sees a man like De Nizza determined to destroy Peru's happiness because suffering predisposes the mind to Christianity.

It all comes to a head in the final scenes, when Pizarro's promise to spare Atahualpa's life is questioned. Valverde speaks for the church when he argues Atahualpa must die, and Pizarro replies vehemently,

'Dungballs to all churches that are or ever could be! How I hate you. "Kill who I bid you kill and I will pardon it!" You with your milky fingers forcing in the blade! How dare you bless any man who goes slicing into battle? But no: you slice with him! "Rip!" you scream, "tear! blind!

*in the name of Christ! "... Tell me soft Father, if Christ was here now, do you think he would kill my Inca?"*⁹

It is a penetrating question - and Pizarro knows the answer. He knows the Christian faith has been so distorted by the civilisation that is promoting it, that its ethics no longer bear any resemblance to those of its founder. In the end he comes to hope that Atahualpa really is the sun god he claims to be, and that if hanged he will rise again to new life with the morning sun. Put simply, the Inca faith is much more attractive. Pizzaro says to De Nizza,

*'And what are your Christians? Unhappy hating men. Look: I'm a peasant, I want value for money. If I go marketing for gods, who do I buy? The God of Europe with all its death and bleeding, or Atahualpa of Peru? His spirit keeps an empire sweet and still as corn in the field.'*¹⁰

It is clear from any detailed reading of history that Shaffer is painting a highly idealised picture of the Inca empire. But his aim is not to offer us an historical account. Rather, he described his play as 'an attempt to define the concept of God,'¹¹ and he helps us see that when the concept of God is defined by a particular culture or civilisation it quickly loses authority and meaning. It is a trap the church has continually fallen into, wedding its life and witness to one form of civilisation or another; thus we too easily live out the belief - for example - that the spread of western civilisation with its democratic institutions, its systems of justice, and its scientific world view, is the mission of the gospel. The result is that the violence of one becomes the violence of the other.

This is, at least in part, the story of our context following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on New York and Washington DC. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington argues that the paradigm that most closely describes the world in which we now live is one that defines itself according to its different civilisations (as opposed to ideological power blocs, national states, or economic traits). Further, Huntington suggests that it is where these different civilisations come up against one another that conflict is most likely to occur.¹² While his reading of the current world order has been criticised, particularly for failing to take account of some of the complex ways in which civilisations interact, the basic thesis has resonated with many, and it certainly helps

us understand why religion is once again a major player on the world stage. The post-Enlightenment world might have expected the influence of religion to slowly wither and die, but not so when different religions are wedded to different civilisations and become a fundamental part of the violent divisions that characterise and define the way our world now is.

This presents a challenge of crucial significance - and sharpens our earlier questions: Is it possible for the mission of the gospel to distance itself from that other missionary movement known as Western civilization? What will it take for the church to become part of the solution to the world's clash of civilisations rather than part of the problem? How might the church build bridges of reconciliation and chart the way of peace rather than be implicated in the violence that is tearing our world apart?

At heart these are questions of identity. As Baptists we often find ourselves anxious to explain who we are, both to others and to ourselves, and we have increasingly used mission as one of our defining characteristics - the one that determines our self-understanding and that expresses our own sense of identity. We have pushed home the argument that the church must be missionary if it is to be true to its very nature; many of our churches have participated in the formulation of mission statements; and we have wanted to mark ourselves out by our commitment to the mission of the gospel. The difficulty with such a concentration on identity is that when we try to say who we are, we also tend to say who we are not, and this very easily produces division and conflict. Where mission is the basis of identity, I suspect that the risks are yet further reinforced. If you are not one of 'us', you must be one of 'them'. If you do not hold to our 'truth', then you need to be convinced of our 'truth'. If you are not with us, then you must be against us.

Of course, we cannot ignore the question of who we are and nor should we. However, I believe we do need to be aware of the dangers, and as a result to take particular care in developing our sense of identity - it needs to hold together a universality and a particularity; it needs, in the words of Jonathan Sacks, to 'give due weight to our commonalities and differences'.¹³

The Christian faith must always find expression within the concrete realities of place and time; it can never exist above and beyond the particularities of culture and civilisation. Yet at the same time, we should surely resist the temptation to abandon too easily the search for language and understanding that can cross barriers and transcend boundaries in the name of peacemaking.

There needs to be a willingness to move beyond and outside the patterns of thought and action established by our own civilisation, as well as the recognition that we are products of one particular civilisation. We need a commitment to the universal covenant made by God through Noah that establishes our oneness with all humanity, as well as a commitment to the particular demands of the new covenant established in Christ. We must see God's mission as a call to resist the universality of injustice and affirm the inherent dignity of all human life, as well as to live out the more particular disciplines of being part of the Christian community. We need to engage in humble listening to all, including those of other faiths and civilisations, as well as the quiet conviction of what we ourselves believe of God revealed in Christ.

Sacks puts it this way: 'What would faith be like? It would be like being secure in one's home, yet moved by the beauty of foreign places, knowing that they are someone else's home, not mine, but still part of the glory of the world that is ours. It would be like being fluent in English, yet thrilled by the rhythms and resonances of an Italian sonnet one only partially understands. It would be to know that I am a sentence in the story of my people and its faith, but that there are other stories, each written in the letters of lives bound together in community, each part of the story of stories that is the narrative of man's search for God and God's call to mankind. Those who are confident in their faith and not threatened but enlarged by the different faiths of others. In the midst of our multiple insecurities, we need that confidence now.'¹⁴ We might add that we need this kind of faith if the Christian tradition is to be a force for peace rather than the cause of further violence.

Towards the end of the play, Shaffer moves us in this direction. Pizarro rails against the narrow vision of the church,

*'Hail to you, sole judge of love! No salvation outside your church: and no love either! Oh, you arrogance!...'*¹⁵

And he goes on to plead with one of his soldiers to understand that he is part of all humanity,

*'...you were born a man. Not a Blue man, or a Green man, but A MAN. You are able to feel a thousand separate loves unordered by fear or solitude. Are you going to trade them all in for Gang-love? Flag-love? Carlos-the-Fifth-love? Jesus-the-Christ-love?'*¹⁶

Too often the church has claimed allegiance to flag, monarch and Christ all at the same time, and our witness to the way of peace has been lost.

Mission in Christ's Way

There is a further issue raised by Shaffer's play. While it may be true that much of our history of violent missionary activity is the result of the church finding its identity in relationship with the dominant civilisation and imitating its desire to seize wealth and power, there is also the question of whether violence is so central to the Christian story itself that it inevitably leads to violence. After all, at its heart is a cross and the act of destroying life.

When the sun god Atahualpa first comes face to face with the Spaniards, he asks to meet Pizarro thinking that their General must also be their god. An exchange takes place,

Valverde: *That was our General. Our God cannot be seen.*

Atahualpa: *I may see him.*

Valverde: *No. He was killed by men and went into the sky.*

Atahualpa: *A god cannot be killed. See my father! You cannot kill him. He lives for ever and looks over his children every day.*¹⁷

A little later in the play there is a further exchange involving the Indian High Priest,

Villac Umu: *Why do you eat your god? To have his strength?*

De Nizza: *Yes, my lord.*

Villac Umu: *But your god is weak. He fights with no man. That is why he was killed.*

De Nizza: *He wanted to be killed, so he could share death with us.*

Atahualpa: *So he needed killers to help him, though you say killing is bad.*¹⁸

We are confronted with the uncomfortable truth that the Christian faith is built on an act of violence even though it claims to be against violence, and as Pizarro searches for a faith that will offer life rather than death, the church's beliefs manifestly fail to satisfy.

The satisfaction theory of atonement developed by Anselm and later by

Calvin has done much to establish violence at the heart of the Christian message - a violence that takes the form of a sacrifice that is wanted and needed by God. The argument is that humanity has sinned against God, and so either humanity must suffer eternal death or offer some kind of equivalent 'satisfaction' to God for the wrong committed. God cannot simply forgive, for that would be to fail to recognise the difference between right and wrong and result in moral disorder, so justice demands that the price be paid. Christ pays off the debt by offering his life freely to God as the one perfect sacrifice - in Calvin's understanding, Christ suffers punishment, enduring torture and murder, in order to wipe away human sin. It is an act of violence required by God.

Though there are other theories of the atonement, it is this one that is most deeply embedded in our Christian understanding. It is there in many of our hymns and songs; it is continually taught in our churches; and more than likely it forms the basis of instruction for those who are searching for faith. Yet the origins of this theory reveal far more about the influence of the prevailing civilisation than any reliable exegesis of scripture.

In thinking about the relationship of God to humanity, Anselm took as his model the feudal lord and the vassals, who owed him service but had defaulted so leaving themselves in debt to his honour. The feudal hierarchy sought to protect the authority, status and honour of the lord, and though it was brutal and oppressive in all kinds of ways, it did maintain order within society. Thus, in using this model to develop his understanding of the atonement, Anselm was not only making sense of it in his own context, but was also offering an indirect justification for the prevailing power structures, social bonds, and system of rights and punishments. Similarly, Calvin was a lawyer who devoted much of his life to developing a system of rule in Geneva that had far-reaching powers over the lives of individual citizens. Not surprisingly, therefore, his model of atonement was judicial, with God's sovereign will offended and requiring punishment in compensation, and this must also have served to reinforce the validity of the legal systems Calvin had developed for the people of Geneva.

It would be surprising if the continuing influence of the satisfaction theory of atonement did not serve a similar purpose within our own society, affirming in the minds of many within our churches the need to maintain good order and the appropriateness of our criminal justice system to do so. It helps

legitimise steps taken to secure retribution and even revenge that do no more than perpetuate the use of violence in the name of justice. It encourages us to give our blessing to a justice system where 48% of those incarcerated in prison have a reading age of an eleven year old or under, and 70% are suffering from two or more mental disorders.¹⁹

But can this be the authentic message of Christianity? Does it lead us to engage in mission in Christ's way? If we are less than happy with a view of the atonement as retributive, so providing an acceptable face to the culture of violence present within our civilisation despite the fact that this is exactly the kind of culture that Jesus set out to refute, then maybe we need to challenge and reject it rather than allow it to continue to dominate popular Christian thinking. Maybe we must recognise that if we are engaged in mission in Christ's way, then we have to give assent to a very different kind of faith understanding.

René Girard is one who leads us in this direction, seeking to take us beyond the attempts of any one civilisation to interpret the human condition by introducing us to 'things hidden since the foundation of the world',²⁰ and Hazel Sherman's essay helpfully introduces us to his thought. Girard's account of the nature of human violence and of the place of violence within religion declares that retributive atonement is not only incapable of redeeming humanity, but is exactly that from which humanity needs salvation. Indeed, Jesus was murdered precisely because he rejected the idea that violence could be redemptive. For Girard, Jesus is innocent of worldly violence, teaching and living a way of love that involves forgiveness of enemies rather than acts of retribution, and in this way he exposes the cycle of violence that dominates our existence. As a result he incurs the wrath of the authorities and is put to death. But his innocence breaks apart the lie that victims deserve their fate - his death exposes the arbitrary and destructive power of human violence. Thus, the cross is not an act of redemptive violence, but instead exposes the truth that violence can never be redemptive. The victory of forgiveness and love become real, and a different way of life can begin to be built. Girard declares, 'There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that the death of Jesus is a sacrifice, whatever definition (expiation, substitution, etc.) we may give for that sacrifice... Thanks to the sacrificial reading it has been possible for what we call Christendom to exist for fifteen or twenty centuries... Mankind relies upon a misunderstanding of the text that explicitly re-

veals the founding mechanism to reestablish cultural forms which remain sacrificial and to engender a society that, by virtue of this misunderstanding, takes its place in the sequence of all other cultures, still clinging to the sacrificial vision that the Gospel rejects.²¹

Girard is surely in danger of overstating his argument at this point. He admitted later in his life that, 'I have come to be more positive about the word "sacrificial",²² perhaps recognizing that the language of sacrifice clearly does have a place in scripture, including the Gospel narratives. But as the essay by Anthony Clarke points out, what matters is how this language of sacrifice is understood. We may helpfully picture God as one who gives up the Son to death, so participating in a way that makes it an act of vulnerable self-giving, but what we must resist is any idea that the sacrifice of the Son is an act of violence on the part of God whose anger has to be appeased. And it is this view of sacrifice that Girard wants to reject.

If we are in search of an understanding of atonement that can be put alongside Girard, then perhaps the thought of Peter Abelard has more to say to us than has sometimes been recognised.²³ Unlike Anselm or Calvin - or, indeed, Gustav Aulen with his image of 'Christus Victor', the triumph of Christ over the powers of evil - Abelard does not draw on the violence of sacrifice, justice or victory in his attempt to understand the meaning of the cross. He invites us to see Jesus' whole life, culminating in death on the cross, as an act of love with power to transform. In the telling, hearing and receiving of this story, we see God's love demonstrated and - more significantly - we experience God's love poured out in us. The story changes us, bringing healing and redemption, and renewing our relationship with God. Love acquires a unique force in the person of Jesus, that restores and justifies those to whom it is revealed.

For Abelard the key to the power of Jesus' story is surely the love that refuses the way of violence, and this is true for Girard as well. With a depth unparalleled in human history, Jesus models an alternative way of living marked by non-violence, and as this narrative becomes embedded in the memory of the world and in the lives of those who receive it, it exposes the sin of violence and opens us to the redeeming power of God. Instead of imitating the cycle of death and destruction, we seek to imitate the way of Jesus. The call to mission becomes a call to live out this story faithfully that the world may see and believe.

Conclusion

To travel through certain parts of the USA and Canada leads to an encounter with the Christian Amish communities. Their distinct forms of dress, transport and lifestyle witness to an alternative way of living that is radically different from the prevailing culture. It is one possible response to the way in which, too easily, the Christian faith has identified itself with Western civilisation. However, while many of us will recognise the power of such counter-cultural witness (and see something of it in our own Baptist history), we will also feel less than comfortable with that response, not least because we are unsure that its lack of genuine engagement takes the mission imperative seriously enough.

We need to be missionary at this critical time when new forms of violence threaten to engulf the world, but we also need to think very carefully about how we understand ourselves in relation to our own civilisation. There is the strength of our dissenting heritage that sets us apart as a distinctive and peculiar people. Yet we can also recognise the ways in which our faith story, despite this tradition of dissent, has been shaped more by western values than gospel values - even in the way we have interpreted the atonement - and so it may be that we need to challenge aspects of the past. Perhaps we cannot simply be the local, gathered church in the way we have been, but instead need to renew a wider, universal vision, so as to seek to transcend our own limited perspectives and affirm the oneness of all humanity in God. Open dialogue across boundaries, with other faiths and cultures, has become a necessity if the church is to be a force for peace.

At the end of Shaffer's play Old Martin reflects on his experiences as a boy, participating alongside Pizarro in the great conquest of the Incas. He says,

*'So fell Peru. We gave her greed, hunger and the cross: three gifts for the civilised life. The family groups that sang on the terraces are gone. In their place slaves shuffle underground and they don't sing there. Peru is a silent country, frozen in avarice. So fell Spain, gorged with gold; distended; now dying.'*²⁴

Thus Shaffer condemns the civilisation that brought together the military might of the state and the militant aspirations of the faith of Christendom.

If in any way the gospel is to be good news to the world, our mission must be in the way of Christ. That challenges past practice and present theology, calling us to reject the idea that violence can be redemptive and pursue the costly path of reconciliation and peacemaking.

Notes

¹ Peter Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, (London: Penguin, 1981).

² Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 14.

³ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 16.

⁴ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 20.

⁵ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 20.

⁶ David Cunningham, *These Three Are One. The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p. 237.

⁷ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 31.

⁸ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 31.

⁹ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 82.

¹¹ Quoted by Andrew Swarbrick in his introduction to Peter Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) p. xv.

¹² Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, (London: Touchstone, 1998).

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilisations*, (London: Continuum, 2003) p. 62.

¹⁴ Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 65-6.

¹⁵ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 84.

¹⁷ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 60.

¹⁹ Figures quoted by the Prison Reform Trust.

²⁰ The title of one of the books written by René Girard.

²¹ René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, (New York: Crossroad, 1996) pp. 178-179.

²² René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, (New York: Crossroad, 1996) p. 272

²³ For a full discussion of Abelard and other atonement theories, see Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation. The Christian Idea of Atonement*, (London: DLT, 1989).

²⁴ Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, p. 90.

Violence and the State: Do I Honour, Obey and Pay Taxes? The Irony of Romans 13*

Tim Carter

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, Graham Sparkes explored the connection between violence and mission and argues that our witness to the way of peace has been compromised when the church has claimed allegiance to flag, monarch and Christ all at the same time. No text has been more influential in wedding allegiance to Christ with allegiance to the state than Romans 13 with its injunction to submit to the governing authorities. Since the passage expressly approves of the use of the sword as an instrument of God's wrath on the evil-doer, this passage has often been used as a means of gaining Christian endorsement for acts of violence on the part of the state.¹ This paper explores how this passage might have been read and understood by its original readers in Rome, while the church was still a marginal sect and its members vulnerable to the institutionalised violence exercised by those in power.

At first sight, the opening verses of Romans 13 Paul offers what appears to be an uncompromising endorsement of political authority.² All authority is ordained by God, and as such should not be resisted (13:1-2). Those who do good need have no fear of the authorities, for they will be commended for their good deeds. However, the sword wielded by those in authority is the instrument of God's anger, inflicting punishment on evildoers (13:3-4). The way to stay out of trouble and keep a clear conscience is to submit to the au-

* This article was originally accepted for publication in *Novum Testamentum*. I am deeply grateful to the publishers, Brill, for giving permission for it to be included in this collection.

thorities (13:5). One should also pay taxes, since those who collect them are God's servants (13:6). In short, one should give all due tribute, tax, fear and honour (13:7). Taken at face value, Paul's words constitute what can be seen as an embarrassingly unqualified endorsement of the political *status quo*.

There is an element of irony in these verses, since Paul's words are pregnant with a significance of which he was unaware. The emperor at the time of writing was Nero, who came to power in AD 54, approximately two years before the most likely date for Romans.³ Yet within ten years Nero, the very emperor whose authority Paul commended, would unleash a terrible persecution against the church. When much of Rome was destroyed by fire in AD 64, many suspected that Nero was responsible, but he pinned the blame on the Christians, and an immense number were thrown to the dogs, nailed to crosses, or set alight as human torches to illuminate Nero's gardens at night.⁴ Tradition has it that Paul himself was beheaded as part of this persecution.⁵ Paul's ignorance of the fate that he and his readers would suffer at the hands of Nero lends an element of tragic irony to his claim that the authorities are not to be feared, because they exist for the benefit of his readers and all those who do good deeds (13:3-4). With the benefit of hindsight, it is all too easy to say that the apostle was misguided in his optimistic assessment of the goodness of the state.

Yet even before the events of AD 64, one wonders how the original audience of Paul's letter would have reacted to Romans 13:1-7. Even if Nero's reign got off to an exceptionally good start, it was only a few years earlier that Claudius had 'expelled the Jews for rioting at the instigation of Chrestus.'⁶ If, as is likely, 'Chrestus' is a misspelling for 'Christ' and the riots took place as a result of the preaching of the gospel, then there is every likelihood that Jewish Christians, and possibly some Gentile Christians associated with them, suffered some rough justice at the hands of the authorities on that occasion.⁷ According to Acts 18:2, Paul met Prisca and Aquila in Corinth after the expulsion, so he would have been aware of what had taken place. One wonders how those who had been evicted from their homes, with the loss of property and business, would have responded to Paul's statement that those who do good need have no fear of the authorities.

In addition, it is likely that the believers in Rome were largely made up of poor non-Latin citizens, who occupied no legal position and were of uncertain official status.⁸ These would scarcely be the kind of people who would

be able to live in the city in safety and security, however much prosperity the upper echelons of society enjoyed. As the most vulnerable members of society, they would have the greatest need of protection from the authorities, but in that culture their poverty would have rendered them easy targets for oppression, rather than qualifying them for special support. The justice system was geared to favour the wealthy and powerful, rather than the poor, who had no influence.⁹ If a poor man was beaten and robbed, he was personally responsible for capturing and bringing his assailant to trial.¹⁰ And when he did so, the scales of justice were weighted against the poor, as Petronius observes: 'Of what avail are laws where money rules alone and the poor suitor can never succeed? So a lawsuit is nothing but a public auction, since the knightly juror who listens to the case gives his vote as he is paid.'¹¹ Given the social context of Paul's audience, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his words might have sounded either naïve or crass in the ears of those who were the victims of such oppression and injustice.

Yet a modern reader acquainted with Paul's other letters may be excused for wondering whether the apostle himself had not suffered from a severe case of amnesia when he wrote that rulers are not a terror to good conduct. What of the rulers of this age who crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8)? Jesus had suffered crucifixion at the hands of the Roman authorities in Israel, even though he had done no wrong. Paul himself had suffered numerous imprisonments and countless floggings, not to mention being stoned (2 Corinthians 11:23-25). Some of these incidents may have been the result of 'mob rule', but others would have been official punishments, meted out by those in authority. Surely Paul's own experience of injustice should have given him pause before speaking so positively of the authorities? It may be that subsequent readers of Romans have accepted without question Luke's portrait of Paul's dealings with the authorities in Acts. Luke tends to portray the authorities as sympathetic to Paul, and it is often those in authority who defend the apostle against the violence of the crowds. However, Luke may have portrayed the authorities in this light as part of his apology for the Christian faith. Apart from Romans 13, Paul has left his readers with no evidence of positive treatment at the hands of the authorities.¹²

As well as the question of Paul's own experience of the authorities, one also has to reckon with the theological context in which the apostle himself wrote. As a Pharisee, he would hardly have been sympathetic to the Romans.

Paul would have read Daniel 7 as a portrait of Rome as the 'fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet' (7:7). Rome was the oppressor and enemy of God's people.¹⁴ Why should Paul now portray the Roman authorities in such a positive light? Was he completely beguiled by the apparently peaceful start to Nero's reign?¹⁵

The Rhetoric of Irony

This article queries the consensus that the text should be understood as an endorsement of the authorities¹⁶ by suggesting that Paul employs the rhetorical device of irony as a covert way of exposing and subverting the oppressive authority structures of the Roman Empire. When the straightforward meaning of a text is recognisably implausible or unacceptable, that is one of the signals that may alert the reader or audience to the presence of irony.¹⁷ A word may be used in a context which renders unlikely or implausible the 'dictionary definition' of the term, so that its normal meaning is subverted, or even reversed. Other signals for the presence of irony include the use of over- or understatement, the presence of factual or logical errors, an inappropriate use of style, or the basing of conclusions on overtly spurious reasoning. The consequent dissonance may lead the discerning reader to adopt an ironic reading of the text which makes sense precisely by virtue of its capacity to subvert the unacceptable surface meaning of the discourse. Those who are not 'in the know', who miss the signals, or who lack sufficient knowledge of the context in which the words are spoken, may miss the irony, and instead be misled by taking the words at face value and interpreting their meaning accordingly.¹⁸

The use of irony in the latter part of the first century AD is spelt out by Quintilian: '[it is] important to bear in mind not merely what is said but about whom it is said, since what is said may in another context be literally true. It is permissible to censure with counterfeited praise and praise under a pretence of blame.'¹⁹ According to Quintilian, the use of irony involves saying the opposite of what one means, so that the meaning conflicts with the language adopted. Irony may assume the tone of command or concession. It may entail mock self-disparagement, attributing to oneself the faults of one's

opponents, or alternatively one may attribute to one's opponents good qualities that they do not actually possess; the latter technique is especially effective if the ironist possesses those qualities which are apparently conceded to the opponents.²⁰ Quintilian provides us with the assurance that irony was a culturally appropriate way for Paul to communicate with his Roman audience, who would have been aware of the ironic technique of blaming by means of apparent praise.

Paul himself was no stranger to the use of irony: he clearly employs this rhetorical device in the Corinthian correspondence, particularly in 1 Corinthians 1-4 and 2 Corinthians 10-13, where he engages in ironic, mock self-disparagement.²¹ More recently, Nanos has argued for the presence of irony in Galatians 1:6-9, claiming that Paul uses irony when he refers to the message of those influencing the Galatians as 'good news'.²² It should occasion no surprise to unearth irony in these, the most polemical of Paul's letters, since irony is an ideal rhetorical weapon for attacking one's opponents.²³ However, since Romans is not an overtly polemical letter, the question arises as to whether it is appropriate to look for irony in Romans 13 at all.

Romans 13 can, of course, be read as a straightforward injunction to submit to the governing authorities and pay taxes. That is how the passage has been interpreted for centuries, and that is also how Paul would have wanted the passage to be read by the authorities in question, should his letter have come into their hands. The use of irony sifts an audience into those who accept the surface meaning of the discourse and those who perceive the hidden, ironic meaning.²⁴ When a skilful ironist employs the technique of blame by apparent praise, those in the know are able to recognise that the commendation is only skin deep, while the victims of irony are inclined to accept the praise at face value. This division is facilitated by the fact that it is most difficult to detect irony when it is one's own beliefs and characteristics that are being subverted.²⁵ A surface reading of Romans 13 is perfectly plausible to those who perceive political power as an instrument of divine rule. Those who wield political power may be naturally predisposed to accept this position, and the centuries-old alliance between church and state has ensured the prevalence of this interpretation of Romans 13. This reading of the passage has been reinforced by the traditional view that Romans is a compendium of Christian doctrine, which simply addresses the question of how believers should relate to the power of the state in Romans 13:1-7.

Yet the original audience of the letter would not have heard the text in

this way. If the letter's original readers shared with the author an experience of oppression at the hands of the authorities, that shared experience would have paved the way for the readers' understanding of Paul's use of irony,²⁶ by rendering the surface meaning of Paul's commendation of the authorities blatantly implausible to them. Whereas irony has the capacity to blind one's opponents to one's true point of view, it also has the capacity to forge a close bond between the ironist and those members of the audience who perceive the irony.²⁷ If Paul could rely on his readers to detect his irony, that would further his aim of commending himself to the Roman church as the apostle to the Gentiles. A surface reading of the text, on the other hand, leaves the apostle making crass remarks that could not have failed to alienate his audience, who had suffered at the hands of the very authorities he was purporting to commend.

The Social Context of the Roman Congregation

If Paul was employing irony here, how could he rely on his readers to detect it? The question is an important one, particularly since the presence of irony has not generally been recognised in this passage. It is only when the text is set against the background of the events that were taking place in Rome in the opening years of Nero's rule that the implausibility of Paul's language becomes apparent. In Romans 14-16, Paul appears to display a depth of knowledge about the Roman congregations, and if this is accepted there is no reason to suppose that he was not also aware of events that were happening in the city itself and their effects upon the believers: one may suppose that whoever informed him of the situation in the church was also aware of events in the city.

In that respect, Paul had a distinct advantage over modern readers of Romans, who may not have read the writings of Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius, which constitute our principle sources of information on the events that were taking place in Rome in the mid-50's AD.²⁸ Their accounts of Nero's reign are not free from bias: all three authors came from the upper classes, that stratum of society that Nero alienated by his success in winning the popularity of the masses in the capital. All three therefore contrive to paint Nero in a poor light. Tacitus was concerned to relate the corruption of the Roman aristocratic tradition under the principate, and thus he portrayed

Nero, the last descendant of Tiberius to reign, as the epitome of corruption and tyranny.²⁹ Suetonius and Dio Cassius subsequently developed the negative aspects of Tacitus' portrait. From other sources we know that the opening years of Nero's reign had much to commend them. Trajan described the first five years of his reign as a golden age,³⁰ although this may have been due to the influence that Seneca and Burrus exerted over matters of government. Seneca praised Nero's policy of clemency: when asked to sign a death warrant, Nero expressed the wish that he had never learned to write.³¹ Plutarch provides evidence of his popularity in his account of how Otho sought to win the favour of the people by erecting a statue in Nero's honour.³² Nero courted the people by displays of extravagant generosity and embarked on an ambitious building programme; his love of entertainments and shows, in which he liked to take part himself, enhanced his popularity with the masses.³³ During the *quinquennium Neronis* Nero provided five years of good government, when he enjoyed the favour, not just of the people, but of the senate as well.

While Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius all acknowledge that this period contrasted greatly with the emperor's later descent into tyranny,³⁴ all three also concur in identifying serious shortcomings in the emperor's behaviour and character in this period. The temptation to dismiss such details on the basis of their bias against the emperor³⁵ should be resisted. The myth that the opening years of Nero's rule were perfect may have developed as a way of explaining why he initially enjoyed the support of so many senators who later condemned him as a monster: the interests of the elite were thus served as much by the positive account of the *quinquennium Neronis* as they were by the vilification of Nero in his later years.³⁶ The negative features attributed to Nero in the opening years of his reign should thus be granted due consideration. With this in mind, it is now time to attempt a reading of Romans 13:1-7 against the background of events that were taking place in Rome at the approximate time when the letter was written

The Literary Context of Romans 13:1-7

To set Romans 13:1-7 in its literary context, the passage forms part of the concluding paraenetic section of the letter. In 14:1-15:13, Paul appears to address specific problems within the Roman church, and in fact the letter as a

whole can be explained in terms of Paul's pastoral response to the tensions between the weak and the strong in the Roman congregations. In Romans 1-4, Paul seeks to establish the equality of the Jewish and Gentile congregations on the basis of faith in Christ, and in Romans 5-8 he argues that the ethnic boundary marker of the law has been effectively replaced by the eschatological boundary markers of baptism and the Spirit. Although that leaves ethnic Israel outside those boundaries, Paul argues that God remains faithful to his people, and that all Israel will yet be saved (Romans 9-11).³⁷

Romans 12-13 contains general paraenesis, which is bracketed by the exhortations to adopt a distinctive lifestyle in relation to the present age in Romans 12:1-2 and 13:11-14; these paragraphs function as an *inclusio*, suggesting that the intervening passage should be read as an exhortation on how Christians should conduct themselves in an evil age which is passing away. 12:3-8 portrays the church as the body of Christ, and this is followed by a series of exhortations grouped under the heading, 'Let love be sincere' (12:9-13).³⁸ Catchword connection appears to link 12:13b and 12:14a, as Paul moves from pursuing hospitality (φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες) to blessing one's persecutors (εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διωκοντας). 12:15-16 then appear to focus on internal relations within the church again (does Paul have in mind the victims of persecution?), before Paul returns to relationships with outsiders in 12:17-21.

Because Romans 13:1-7 lacks any eschatological qualification, these verses have been identified as a foreign body in the letter,³⁹ and the work of an interpolator has been suspected.⁴⁰ However, an ironic reading of these verses locates them securely within the eschatological *inclusio* of 12:1-2 and 13:11-14, which subverts the apparent commendation of the authorities of 13:1-7: Paul only *seems* to grant the authorities an unconditional status: in reality they belong to the present age of darkness which is passing away. Furthermore, with reference to the immediate context, the move from considering how one should respond to one's enemies outside the church (12:17-21) to how one should relate to the authorities (13:1-7) is a natural one, if believers suffered at the authorities' hands.⁴¹ An ironic reading of Romans 13:1-7, which portrays the authorities as enemies rather than as friends, provides a secure link with the preceding paragraph.

At the end of the paragraph in question, catchword connection appears to link 13:7, with its command to pay one's debts (ὀφειλάς), with the injunction to owe (ὀφείλετε) no one anything except love in 13:8. Paul thus picks up the

theme of love from 12:9-13, and his focus moves away from relationships with outsiders and back to the need for mutual love within the church. Paul seems to regard this as being more important: the injunction to pay the debts of tax, revenue, respect and honour to outsiders is relativised by the ensuing imperative to have no debts to anyone except the debt of love to one's neighbour, by means of which the law is fulfilled.

Paul refers to the dawning of the day of the Lord, which heralds the end of the age in which the believers live (12:1-2). Believers are to put off the works of darkness, represented by such behaviour as revelling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, they are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and the armour of light, and live honourably as those who belong to the new day that is dawning (13:11-14). If adopted, an ironic reading of Romans 13:1-7 would cohere well with the eschatological qualification that brackets the passage in question.

Irony in Romans 13:1-7

To turn to 13:1-7 itself, Paul's opening injunction appears uncompromising enough: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment' (13:1-2). Paul's opening imperative focuses on the need to submit to the authorities, for it is God who has appointed them. There may well be an element of hidden irony in the reason given for the required submission: the claim that the authorities have been appointed by God subtly subverts their apparently absolute status, since they cannot but be subject to the God who has appointed them.⁴² As Paul moves on to spell out the nature and purpose of that authority, the irony of his words begins to become more apparent: 'For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer' (13:3-4).

Wisdom 6:4 has been cited as a reference supporting Paul's view of the authorities being instituted by God as his servants,⁴³ but its address to the

kings and judges of the earth actually subverts Paul's meaning: 'For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High; he will search out your works and enquire into your plans. Because as servants (ὑπηρέται) of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places' (6:3-5). Since Wisdom 6:4 refers to Gentile rulers as servants of God who fail to do his bidding, the text undermines, rather than supports a positive portrait of the authorities as God's servants in Romans 13.⁴⁴

As far as Paul's readers were concerned, Paul's words would only have credibility if the authorities recognisably acted as God's servants for their benefit, if those who lived upright lives were commended for doing so and had no cause to fear those in authority. The expulsions that took place under Claudius a few years before would suggest the opposite, and according to Dio Cassius, the Jews in Rome were 'often repressed'.⁴⁵ Tacitus' account of the exercise of authority in Puteoli gives some insight into the way in which the Senate wielded political power in Nero's day:

'Under the same consuls, audience was given to deputations from Puteoli, despatched separately to the senate by the decurions and the populace, the former inveighing against the violence of the mob, the latter against the rapacity of the magistrates and of the leading citizens in general. Lest the quarrels, which had reached the point of stone-throwing and threats of arson, should end by provoking bloodshed under arms, Gaius Cassius was chosen to apply the remedy. As the disputants refused to tolerate his severity, the commission at his own request was transferred to the brothers Scribonius; and these were given a praetorian cohort, the terrors of which, together with a few executions, restored the town to concord.'⁴⁶

Such was the nature of Roman 'justice': peace was imposed upon the local population by means of intimidation and violence, and this was by no means unusual.⁴⁷ As Cranfield points out, Paul's words serve as 'a reminder that the government is possessed of military power and so is in a position to quell resistance'.⁴⁸ Paul was right to say that those in authority did not bear the sword in vain but, contrary to Romans 13:4, the innocent had as much to fear from the sword as the wrongdoer.

Tacitus also records incidents in Rome when the use of the sword by those in authority had nothing to do with the maintenance of law and order:

'The consulship of Quintus Volusius and Publius Scipio was marked by peace abroad and by disgraceful excesses at home, where Nero – his identity dissembled under the dress of a slave – ranged the streets, the brothels, and the wine shops of the capital, with an escort whose duties were to snatch wares exhibited for sale and to assault all persons they met, the victims having so little inkling of the truth that he himself took his buffets with the rest and bore their imprints on his face. Then, it became notorious that the depredator was Caesar; outrages on men and women of rank increased; others, availing themselves of the licence once accorded, began with impunity, under the name of Nero, to perpetrate the same excesses with their own gangs; and night passed as it might in a captured town. Julius Montanus, a member of the senatorial order, though he had not yet held office, met the emperor casually in the dark, and, because he repelled his offered violence with spirit, then recognized his antagonist and asked for pardon, was forced to suicide, the apology being construed as a reproach. Nero, however, less venturesome for the future, surrounded himself with soldiers and crowds of gladiators, who were to stand aloof from incipient affrays of modest dimensions and semi-private character: should the injured party behave with too much energy, they threw their swords into the scale.'⁴⁹

According to Goddard, stories of rulers who like to dress up as their subjects are familiar enough in history, but such stories are always told of popular kings who have a genuine concern for the welfare of their people. Accordingly, Goddard argues that the violence in the above account reflects the influence of the elite, who distorted accounts of Nero dressing up as a commoner and mingling with his subjects, sharing their pleasures and experiencing their lives.⁵⁰ But the account is not so easily dismissed. Whereas other accusations levelled against Nero may be dismissed as stereotypes belonging to the standard rhetoric of defamation, without any historical basis,⁵¹ the fact that the above story is without parallel in other accounts of monarchs is evidence in favour of its historical authenticity, as is the specific identification of Julius Montanus as the senator who attacked the emperor.

Yet even if such an event never actually took place, the circulation of such 'notorious' stories would have sufficed for Paul's commendation of the authorities to sound incongruous to his listeners.⁵² If there were a general perception that those in authority wielded the sword indiscriminately against

both innocent and guilty people, it is correspondingly likely that Paul's audience would have detected irony in his portrait of those in power as the guardians of law and order. By portraying the authorities as those who worked for the benefit of upright citizens and who wielded the sword in order to punish evildoers, Paul highlights the ways in which the authorities in Rome were actually falling short of the ideal of good government that he portrayed. Furthermore, if readers of Romans detected an oblique reference to such events in Romans 13:4, they would scarcely miss the echo of Nero's profligate behaviour in the works of darkness mentioned in 13:13. An ironic reading of Romans 13 peels back the surface meaning of the text to reveal a sharp criticism of Nero's excesses.

In 13:5, Paul reinforces the imperative of 13:1, but once again, the basis on which the imperative is grounded is suspect: 'Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.' Fear of repercussions leads to an unquestioning obedience to the state, but Paul's mention of conscience introduces a new factor into the equation. As Leenhardt astutely observes, 'if obedience is a matter of conscience, then it is no longer servile; when conscience is introduced as the motive of obedience, the latter can no longer be counted on!'⁵³ On the one hand, it is possible to keep a clear conscience by submitting to the authorities and staying out of trouble, and it is possible to read the text at that level alone. On the other hand however, the last thing a totalitarian regime wants is a population with a conscience: conscience gets in the way of unquestioning obedience; conscience submits to the authority of God rather than of the state. Paul has already indicated that the conscience will bear witness to people's conduct on the Day of Judgment, when the exposure of their secret thoughts will serve to accuse or excuse them (Romans 2:15-16). It is possible that Paul introduces the concept of conscience at this point precisely because it functions as an arbiter of right and wrong⁵⁴ that is independent of the power of the state. People are not called to unquestioning submission: believers are to follow their conscience.

In Romans 13:6-7, Paul continues: 'For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due to them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, honour to whom honour is due.' In 1976, Friedrich, Pöhlmann and Stuhlmacher⁵⁵ drew on the writings of Tacitus when they suggested that Romans 13:6-7 should be interpreted against the background of a revolt against hefty indirect taxation.⁵⁶ It is suggested that, before that date,

there would have been widespread dissatisfaction with the levying of taxes, and that Paul responded to the situation of unrest by counselling his readers to pay their taxes as loyal citizens. According to Tacitus, the reaction against indirect taxation took place in 58 AD⁵⁷

‘In the same year, as a consequence of repeated demands from the public, which complained of the exactions of the revenue farmers, Nero hesitated whether he ought not to decree the abolition of all indirect taxation and present the reform as the noblest of gifts to the human race. His impulse, however, after much preliminary praise of his magnanimity, was checked by his older advisers, who pointed out that the dissolution of the empire was certain if the revenues on which the state subsisted were to be curtailed: - ‘For, the moment the duties on imports were removed, the logical sequel would be a demand for the abrogation of all direct taxes. To a large extent, the collecting companies had been set up by the consuls and plebeian tribunes while the liberty of the Roman nation was still in all its vigour: later modifications had only been introduced in order that the amount of income and the necessary expenditure should tally. At the same time, a check ought certainly to be placed on the cupidity of the collectors; otherwise a system which had been endured for years without a complaint might be brought into ill odour by the new-fashioned harshnesses.’

Tacitus provides evidence that Nero had concerned himself with unjust taxation before this event in his account of Obultronius Sabinus, one of the officials of the exchequer, who was accused of stretching his right of confiscation with merciless rigour against the poor. In response the emperor transferred the charge of the public accounts from the officials concerned to the commissioners.⁵⁸

Dio Cassius, on the other hand, identifies Nero as the one directly responsible for the levying of excessive taxes at the very start of his reign: ‘...he soon exhausted his funds in the imperial treasury, and soon found himself in need of new revenues. Hence unusual taxes were imposed, and the estates of those who possessed property were pried into; some of the owners lost their possessions by violence and others lost their lives as well.’⁵⁹ Dio Cassius implies that it was the wealthy who were the victims of the unjust taxes opposed by Nero, and his account may well reflect the prejudice of the ruling classes against the emperor. The verdict of Bradley should be accepted, that

the emperor inherited a weak financial position, which worsened as his reign progressed, and for which Nero was deemed responsible by his biographers.⁶⁰

Insofar as the poor were affected by taxes, it is appropriate to accept Tacitus' account, which suggests that Nero attempted to alleviate the burden of taxation suffered by the poor, since this corresponds well with what is known of Nero's desire to be popular with the masses, and so is historically plausible. The responsibility for the unfair taxation system thus rested, not primarily with the emperor, but with those who were responsible for collecting the taxes, whose rapacity was notorious. This is the background against which Paul's commendation of paying taxes needs to be read.

It is the reputed dishonesty of Roman tax collectors that makes Paul's designation of them as λειτουργοὶ θεοῦ all the more surprising. On the one hand it is apparent that the noun λειτουργός could be used of a 'public servant' who discharged a service to the state.⁶¹ If, as is possible, such service was given free of charge,⁶² then there is an inescapable element of irony in Paul's choice of this term to denote tax collectors, who were notorious for lining their pockets at others' expense. On the other hand, the phrase as λειτουργοὶ θεοῦ has inescapably cultic overtones.⁶³ Citing Romans 12:1, Dunn suggests that Paul's use of this phrase constitutes 'a further reminder that the division between sacred and secular has been broken down'.⁶⁴ It is certainly the case that, if Paul had wanted to present the tax collectors as God's servants, he could scarcely have found a stronger way of putting it.

Yet this would seem to be a clear case of Paul's language straining against the context in which it has been placed. Whereas the context suggests that λειτουργός bears the normal secular meaning of 'officials', the combination of words as λειτουργοὶ θεοῦ would normally bear the cultic meaning, 'God's priests', especially for readers familiar with the Septuagint. Since that is such an inappropriate designation for the officials in question, it not surprising that this translation is not generally adopted. Yet it may well be that Paul deliberately selected a cultic term to denote the tax collectors in order to guide his readers to an ironic interpretation of the passage: the lack of correspondence between the language Paul employs and the reality to which it refers is intended to signal the presence of irony. In this case, the designation of rapacious tax collectors as 'God's priests' is a case of hyperbole: the use of religious language to denote the activity of the tax collectors stretches the meaning of the language to breaking point and highlights the way in which

the tax collectors fail to live up to the designation applied to them. The discrepancy is intentional: God's priests? Nothing could have been further from the truth! Furthermore, as Quintilian observes, irony is especially effective if one attributes to one's opponents good qualities that are missing in them, but present in the ironist.⁶⁵ Since Paul refers to himself in Romans 15:16 as λειτουργόν Χριστού, charged with the priestly service of bringing the gospel of God to the Gentiles, there is a strong possibility that he is contrasting his own genuine priestly service of Christ with the 'service' performed by the self-seeking tax collectors. Towards the end of this paragraph, Paul's irony would have become more and more overt to his Roman audience. When in 13:7, Paul goes on to command the payment of taxes and revenue to those to whom it is due, and payment of respect and honour to those to whom such qualities are due, the readers are left to judge for themselves whether those commissioned with the task of collecting taxes and revenue are also worthy of respect and honour.

Conclusion

When read against the social context of the original readers of Paul's letter, it is apparent that the way in which political power was exercised in Rome would not have predisposed Paul's readers simply to accept what the apostle wrote at face value. The lack of correspondence between his words and the reality to which they referred was too great. This points in the direction of the rhetorical use of verbal irony, where the tension between the words and the reality they denote can be enough to reverse the plain meaning of the text. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul's commendation of the authorities is sufficiently overstated for his readers to understand it as a covert exposure of the shortcomings of Roman rule: the apostle adopts the ironic policy of 'blaming through apparent praise'. The governing authorities may have been appointed by God, but they were not fulfilling their divinely allotted function. The reasons given for the required submission to the authorities are thus seen to be spurious, and this also commends an ironic reading of the paragraph.

By using the technique of irony, Paul was able to express his criticism without fear of repercussions from the authorities, who may have been oblivious to the disparity between the ideal he portrays and the reality of their government.⁶⁶ Who could object to what Paul wrote, especially as it is

prefaced with such an uncompromising endorsement of the political powers and commanded such unquestioning obedience? Yet the literary context of Paul's words betrays his true intention. Paul's command that every person be subject to the governing authorities follows immediately after Romans 12:20-21: 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' The authorities had no need of food and drink from the Christians in Rome, but submission to the authorities was one way of heaping burning coals on their heads. To resort to rebellion or violent revolution would not only have been futile: it would have entailed being overcome by evil, rather than overcoming evil with good.⁶⁷ Paul's ironic portrait of the political authorities was an attempt to achieve the latter aim, using the pen rather than the sword.

Of course, the text does not demand an ironic interpretation: it is perfectly possible to continue to understand it, in accordance with common opinion, as a straightforward injunction to submit to the governing authorities. There is no trace of irony in 1 Peter 2:13-17, and if this passage was written under the influence of Romans 13, it would seem that the author was content to take Paul's words at face value. Equally, Romans 13 has often been read as establishing a standard to which all governing authorities should aspire. Any reader who lives under a benevolent and just form of government and who finds that reflected in Romans 13 will almost certainly accept the surface meaning of the text. Yet it must be asked whether it is likely that all the original readers of Romans 13 would have understood the passage in this way. Would not the lack of congruence between Paul's commendation of the authorities and the reality of what was actually taking place in Rome have prompted an ironic interpretation of his words?

This article began with the observation that it is ironic that Paul should have commended the very authorities that would shortly launch a persecution in which he would lose his own life. If the above interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 is correct, that reading of those verses seriously underestimates the apostle: he was well aware of the power of the state and the way in which it was generally abused. By the use of irony, Paul was seeking to undermine and subvert the very structures he was appearing to endorse. In that case, perhaps the greatest irony of Romans 13 lies in the fact that Paul's ironic meaning has generally been missed, with the result that Romans 13 has been used to support regimes every bit as corrupt and oppressive and hostile to Christi-

anity as the Roman Empire in the days of Nero. An element of tragic irony thus remains an inescapable feature of this passage.

Notes

¹ For a critique of the ways in which Romans 13 has been used to stifle Christian opposition to political systems of domination and oppression, see N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*, (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995) pp. 3-24. Moo offers a brief overview of the different ways in which interpreters have wrestled with the difficulties of this passage: D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) pp. 806-10.

² Despite the arguments of Cullmann, there is little doubt that Paul has political authority in view here; see. O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, (London: SCM, 1957) pp. 95-114.

³ See. R. Jewett, *Dating Paul's Life*, (London: SCM, 1979); J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: a Critical Life*, (Oxford: OUP, 1997) p. 332. Arguments for an earlier date are unconvincing.

⁴ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.2-8.

⁵ Eusebius, *HE* II.25.5-8; Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica* 29.3.

⁶ Suetonius, *de Vita Caesarum: Claudius* 25.4

⁷ Both Suetonius and Luke speak of Claudius expelling the Jews. While this *could* be taken to mean that Claudius expelled the Jews to protect the Christians, this must be deemed unlikely. Suetonius may not have differentiated between Jews and Christians; Luke may simply have heard that 'the Jews' had been expelled. An earlier, violent expulsion took place in AD 19 (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36).

⁸ So J.S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) pp. 3-35; see. P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989) pp. 53-123; J.J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). Priscilla and Aquila may have been relatively well off, but they too suffered in Claudius' expulsion of the Jews (Acts 18:2).

⁹ See, e.g., B.W. Winter, 'Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church', *NTS* 37 (1991) pp. 559-72.

¹⁰ Jeffers, *Conflict*, p. 6.

¹¹ Petronius, *Satyricon* 14.2.

¹² Paul's perspective on the outside world in Romans 13 seems unusually positive when compared with his other letters; see E. Adams, *Constructing the World*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), especially pp. 204-7. Adams acknowledges that Paul's view of the world elsewhere is predominantly negative (p. 241), but argues that Romans 13 is part of Paul's attempt to construct a positive view of the world in this letter.

¹³ See. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992) pp. 189-95.

¹⁴ See. M. Borg, 'A New Context for Romans xiii', *NTS* 19 (1972-3) pp. 205-18.

¹⁵ Stein defends a surface reading of Romans 13 on the basis that, when Paul wrote the letter, the Roman government could be seen as a force for good: R.H. Stein, 'The Argument of Romans 13:1-7', *NovT* 31 (1989) pp. 325-43.

¹⁶ See the discussion of 'The Believer's Obligation to the State', in C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975-79) vol. 2, pp. 651-73.

¹⁷ See W.C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974); 'The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Irony: Or, Why Don't You Say What You Mean?', in D.M. Burks (ed.), *Rhetoric, Philosophy and Literature: An Exploration*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1978) pp. 1-13.

¹⁸ According to Booth, the five crippling handicaps when it comes to discerning irony are: ignorance, the inability to pay attention, prejudice, lack of practice and emotional inadequacy (*Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 227).

¹⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.55.

²⁰ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.48-50; see Ps-Demetrius, *Epistolary Types* 20, in A.J. Malherbe (ed.), *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

²¹ J. Reumann, 'St. Paul's Use of Irony', *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1955) pp. 140-5; J. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash*, (Reykjavik: Bókautgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1965); A.B. Spencer, 'The Wise Fool (and the Foolish Wise): A Study of Irony in Paul', *NovT* 23 (1981) pp. 349-60; K.A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); G. Holland, 'Paul's Use of Irony as a Rhetorical Technique', in S.E. Porter & T.H. Olbricht (eds.), *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture: Essays from the 1995 London Conference*, (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997) pp. 234-48.

²² M.D. Nanos, *Irony in Galatians*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

²³ See L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 40-1.

²⁴ According to Holland, irony divides an audience into four groups: 1. wolf-confederates, who recognise the intended, ironic meaning and agree with it; 2. wolf victims, who recognise the intended meaning and disagree with it, agreeing instead with the surface meaning; 3. sheep confederates, who do not recognise the ironic meaning, but who would agree with it if it were pointed out to them, since they reject the surface meaning of the text; 4. sheep victims, who do not recognise the irony and simply take the surface meaning of the discourse at face value ('Paul's Use of Irony', p. 236). If Paul did use irony in Rom 13, then for most of its history the church has been a 'sheep victim' of this text. Since the Holocaust, there has been a growing number of 'sheep confederates'; whether this article has the power to change 'sheep confederates' into 'wolf confederates', the reader must decide.

²⁵ See Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 81.

²⁶ Hutcheon argues that it is community that enables irony to happen: irony cannot be understood unless it is embodied in a particular context of time and place, immediate social location and general culture. Irony may be missed where the ironist and the interpreter belong to different discursive communities which do not intersect or overlap enough for the irony to be detected (*Irony's Edge*, p. 89-101).

²⁷ Booth, 'Pleasures and Pitfalls', p. 11.

²⁸ See Tacitus (*Annals* 13), Suetonius (*De Vita Caesarum: Nero*), and Dio Cassius (*Roman History* 61).

²⁹ J-P Rubiés, 'Nero in Tacitus and Nero in Tacitism: the historian's craft', in J. Elsner and J. Masters (eds.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation*, (London: Duckworth, 1994) pp. 29-47.

³⁰ Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 5.2.

³¹ Seneca, *de Clementia*, 1.1; 2.1.

³² Plutarch, *Otho* 3.

³³ Z. Yavetz, *Plebs and Princeps*, (Oxford: Clarendon 1969) p.24, 115, 124; W. Jakob-Sonnabend, *Untersuchungen zum Nero-Bild der Spätantike*, (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1990) pp. 153-78.

³⁴ See M.T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1984) pp. 37-9.

³⁵ See the one-sided assessment of the start of Nero's reign, which disregards all negative reports of his behaviour before the assassination of Agrippina, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (30 vols.; London: William Benton, 1979) vol. 12, p. 965; a similar line is taken in the article on Nero in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (Oxford: OUP, 1996) pp. 1037-8.

³⁶ See T.E.J. Wiedemann, 'Tiberius to Nero', in A.K. Bowman, E. Champlin & A.

Lintott (eds.), *Cambridge Ancient History*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) vol. 10, pp. 243-4.

³⁷ See T.L. Carter, *Paul and the Power of Sin: Redefining 'Beyond the Pale'*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) pp. 147-72.

³⁸ See D.A. Black, 'The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style and Ethics in Romans 12.9-21', *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 1 (1989) p. 3-21.

³⁹ E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, (London: SCM, 1980) p. 352; O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) pp. 393-4.

⁴⁰ See J. Kallas, 'Romans XIII 1-7: An Interpolation', *NTS* 11 (1965) pp. 365-74; J.C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) pp. 207-14.

⁴¹ If, as is likely, Paul was aware of the persecution they suffered, that would account for his addressing this aspect of the pastoral situation in Rome before he turns to address the subject of internal relations in Romans 14-15.

⁴² See B. Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework*, (JSNTS 210; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001) pp. 291-2, n. 273: 'Paul's deftness of manipulating the system by working it against its self-negating proclivities is so successful as to camouflage his own wit when castigating its representatives. Throughout Romans 13:1-7 the irony is veiled (to incomprehension) as a political stereotype. 'Fear the governing officials' may sound as an irreproachable advice to the authorities' ear but these are, unbeknown to themselves, slaves to God as well (13:1)...Paul must have laughed when writing, τῷ τὸν φόβον τὸν φόβον.'

⁴³ Dunn, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 764.

⁴⁴ One is reminded too of Jesus' comment that, 'among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them' (Mark 10:42; see Matt. 20:25). If Jesus' words and Wisdom 6:3-4 are any reflection of popular Jewish opinion of Gentile rulers, they render more unlikely the possibility that Paul's words would be accepted without question, at least by any Jewish Christian readers in Rome.

⁴⁵ Dio Cassius, *History* 27.17.1.

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Annals* 13.49; translated by J. Jackson, Loeb Classical Library (5 vols.; London: Heinemann, 1931), vol. 5, pp. 85-87.

⁴⁷ See. K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, (London: SCM, 1987).

⁴⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 667.

⁴⁹ Tacitus, *Annals* 13.25 (Jackson, Loeb 5.41-43). See Suetonius, *Nero* 27; Dio Cassius, *History* 61.8.1. These events probably took place in 55 AD.

⁵⁰ J. Goddard, 'The Tyrant at Table', in J. Elsner & J. Masters (eds.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation*, (London: Duckworth 1994) pp. 67-82.

⁵¹ See T. Barton, 'The Invention of Nero: Suetonius', in Elsner & Masters, *Reflections of Nero*, p.48-63.

⁵² See Dio Cassius, *History* 61.8.5: 'Everything that could conceivably happen was noised abroad as having actually taken place.'

⁵³ F.J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Lutterworth, 1961) p. 335.

⁵⁴ See M. Thrall, 'The Pauline Use of *συνείδησις*', *NTS* 14 (1967-8) p. 118-25.

⁵⁵ J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann & P. Stuhlmacher, 'Zur historischen Situation und Intention von Röm 13,1-7', *ZTK* 73 (1976) pp. 153-9.

⁵⁶ Indirect taxes were raised from the payment of customs duties at the ports and frontiers and tolls at the gates of Rome; the collection of fees for the use of public grazing lands was also farmed out to the *publicani*. See D.W. Rathbone, 'The Imperial Finances', in A.K. Bowman, E. Champlin & A. Lintott (eds.), *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 10, pp. 309-323.

⁵⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 13:50 (Jackson, Loeb pp. 89-91).

⁵⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 13.28; cf. also Suetonius, *Nero* 10.1.

⁵⁹ Dio Cassius, *History* 61.5.5; see 61.5.3; Suetonius, *Nero* 30-32.

⁶⁰ K.R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary*, (Brussels: Latomus, 1978) pp. 185-90.

⁶¹ See Septuagint Joshua 1:1 (A); 2 Kings 13:18; 3 Kings 10:5; 2 Chronicles 9:4; Ecclesiasticus. 10:2; 3 Maccabees. 5:5. Only the last two Septuagint references carry a clear non-cultic sense.

⁶² See K. Hess, 'λειτουργεω' in C. Brown (ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (4 vols.; Exeter: Paternoster, 1976) vol. 3, pp. 551-3.

⁶³ See. 2 Esdras 7.24; Nehemiah 10.39 (40); Ecclesiasticus. 7.30; Isaiah 61.6; Hebrews 8.2; in Isaiah 61.6, λειτουργοὶ Θεοῦ is used in parallel with ἱερεῖς κυρίου. A figurative cultic reference is found in 4 Kings 4:43; 6:15; Psalm 102 (103):21; 103 (104):4; (Hebrews 1:7). Paul himself uses the word with clear cultic connotations in Romans 15:16; see Philippians 2:25 (and. 4:18).

⁶⁴ Dunn, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 767.

⁶⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9.2.48-50.

⁶⁶ See. J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*,

(London: Yale University Press, 1990) p. 96: '...subordinate groups have typically learned...to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure.' Paul's use of irony here would come in the category of what Scott terms 'the infrapolitics of subordinate groups.' (p. 183-201)

⁶⁷ Having said that, it could be argued that the spurious reasoning offered to support the injunction to submit renders the injunction itself invalid. If the irony is pressed, the exposé of the failures of the governing authorities could be taken as a call to refuse to submit to their authority. That would, however, not have been a realistic option for Paul's readers.





2001 to 2010 has been designated by the World Council of Churches as the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace. It has encouraged churches, ecumenical organisations, and all people of goodwill to work together for peace and justice, to act in solidarity with those who are oppressed and struggling, to repent of our complicity in violence and to engage in theological reflection to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain has responded to this challenge through a series of initiatives under the title, 'Following Jesus in a Violent World.' In this book a group of Baptist Ministers contribute to this process with their own theological reflections on the encounter with violence in both scripture and experience.

IBTS Centre Amsterdam



42123 83502